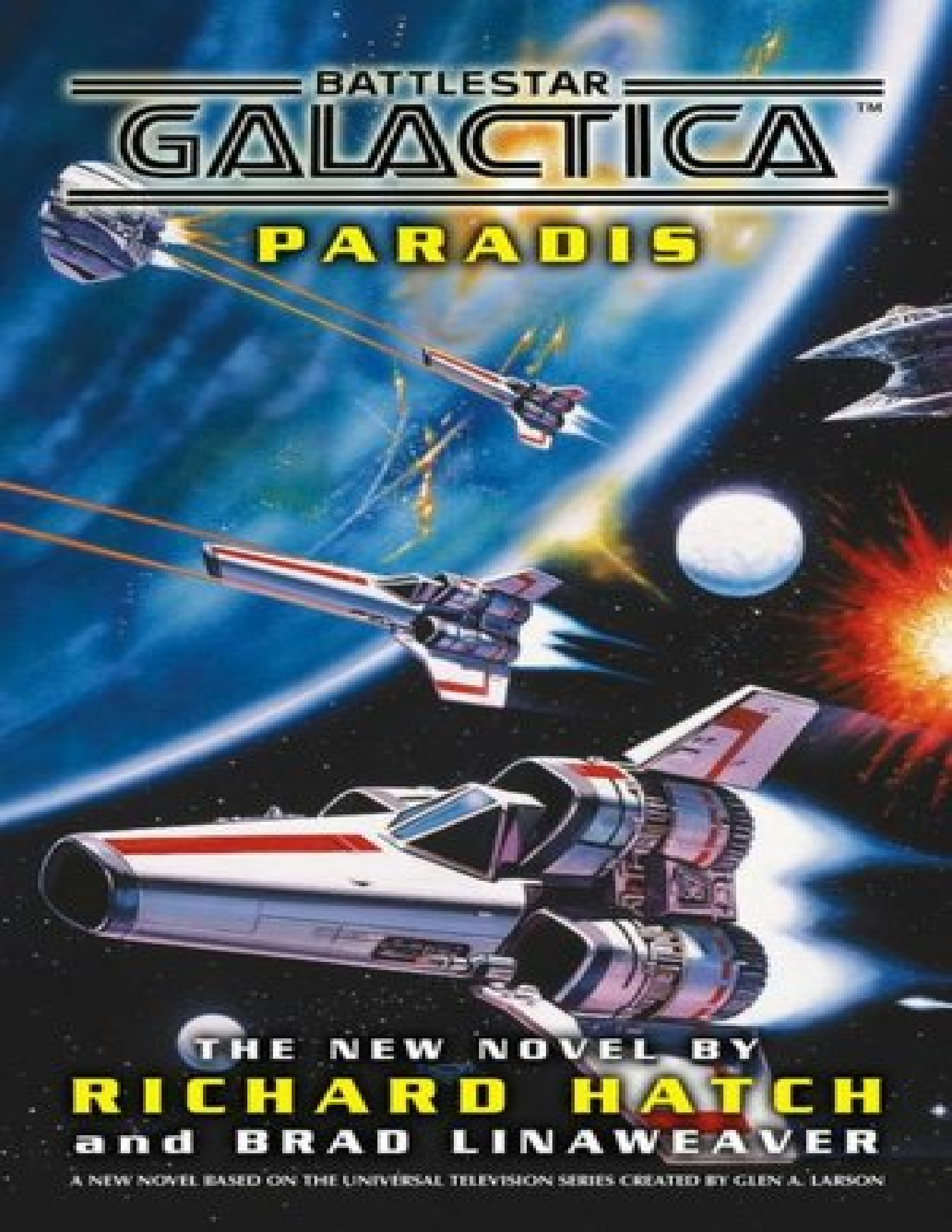


The background of the cover is a dynamic space battle scene. In the foreground, a large white and red Battlestar is shown from a low angle, moving towards the viewer. Behind it, several smaller ships are engaged in combat, with bright energy blasts and explosions visible. A large, bright blue planet with white clouds is in the upper left, and a smaller, pale moon is in the upper right. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, whites, and reds, with bright yellow and orange highlights from the explosions.

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA™

PARADIS

THE NEW NOVEL BY
RICHARD HATCH
and **BRAD LINAWEAVER**

A NEW NOVEL BASED ON THE UNIVERSAL TELEVISION SERIES CREATED BY GLEN A. LARSON

Battlestar Galactica: Paradis

Richard Hatch

Prologue

So long as the music was in his head, he knew what to do. He could fly any mission and become one with his Viper. It was natural to put away those parts of himself that might make him hesitate for that crucial micron separating life from death.

It was impossible for a civilian to grasp what drove him. He had a knack for letting go in that special way where he saved his life because he didn't care.

Cylons did not understand a human warrior any better than a civilian would understand him. Cylons were part of a true collective. A Colonial warrior was an individual who chose to be part of a greater whole to serve and defend every person's right to be free.

Personal survival meant nothing to a Cylon, but that was as much a weakness as a strength. They had nothing to sacrifice.

This warrior was in love with life, as many women could testify. But he was also ready and willing to throw that life away if he could damage the enemy. That paradox enraged Imperious Leader. Mankind was made up of creatures that could not be predicted.

Mankind produced warriors like Starbuck.

The women in his life ached to put music in him. But the music was already there, a song of clear horizons and empty space; the beauty of a blank radar screen after he had done his part emptying the sky of Cylon fighters.

Starbuck had become an even more dangerous warrior as he grew older. His love for his daughter, Dalton, made him braver, not more cautious. Now he had more for which to fight!

The twenty-five yahren of suffering and dying in the long quest put steel in his soul. He felt a greater appreciation for Apollo as his best friend grew into the grueling responsibility of commander of the fleet after the death of Adama.

Apollo had to worry about *everyone* in ways that Starbuck did not.

Apollo had to make decisions about those who would live and those who would die. Starbuck only had to fight and be willing to die, if necessary.

Across the great divide of leadership, the two men faced each other and accepted their different duties. They both heard the same music—which is not always true of leaders and those who must carry out orders. Apollo would always have his warrior soul.

If Imperious Leader ever saw into the minds of these two men, he would want to exterminate them before all other humans. He would understand that they were even more dangerous than he first imagined. Not all human beings would struggle to the end because of the love they felt for their friends and their species. Only heroes do that.

The hardest kind of love pays any price for freedom. These men are heroes. The tragedy is that they are not meant to live in any kind of paradise.

Chapter One

There were too many eyes. That's what Baltar hated most about the nightmares. The eyes followed him everywhere, like a skyeye. But these things were all wet and living, not a robot camera. They were the many cold eyes of Imperious Leader, followed by the watery eyes of Count Iblis in human form. And finally they were the eyes of every person who had ever died because of Baltar's betrayals! There were even the sorrowful tear-filled orbs of his long dead parents.

Every single one of them judged him, again and again. But since there were no ears to hear his protestations of innocence, only he could hear himself. Baltar judged Baltar.

Each time he dreamed the nightmare, it lasted a little longer. And there were variations, always for the worse. The dream sometimes began in the past when he first stood before Imperious Leader and schemed against his own kind. Although humanity had grown weary of a war stretching out over a thousand yahren, the Cylons had no problem. They only functioned well if provided with an unyielding purpose. Time meant nothing to them.

In the dream, Baltar was told more than the Cylons had ever revealed in his actual experience of their peculiar hospitality. His sleeping mind was every bit as curious as his waking self was when it had information. Did the dream mean something? Had he uncovered the key to their alien philosophy, and was trying to tell the secret to himself? Or could the dreams be some form of communication from the Cylons?

"Baltar!" a voice thundered from the head of the Cylon leader, his myriad eyes pulsing with malice. "You were the perfect ally against your own people and do you know why?"

Baltar preferred not to answer. Instead, he fled down corridors without end. He was cold. The corridors were dark, except for a sickly illumination revealing jagged edges of a gray, metallic world. Then the Great Traitor fell and tasted blood.

Lifting his hand to his face he could discern crimson droplets on his fingers. The light became stronger and he could see the red spots rise from his hand to form red eyes floating in front of him—the eyes of Imperious Leader that would not leave him alone.

Again the other eyes, the damnable vast quantity of other eyes, gathered around until they were as many as the stars in space.

He staggered to his feet and prepared to run some more. But then something changed. Even in the dungeon of his sleeping mind he finally refused to be intimidated.

He stood his ground. Baltar demanded that his own nightmare make sense or go away! One by one, the eyes winked out until all that remained were those belonging to Imperious Leader, whose monstrous head formed silently around these little, dancing points of fire.

"Why was I the perfect traitor?" Baltar finally asked.

"Because you never loved," came the dry, sad answer.

The three-lobed brain of Imperious Leader could not abide human love. No matter from how many directions the brain analyzed the problem, co-existence was impossible with beings corrupted by such an emotion.

Love was unpredictable. It put the loyalty that one individual felt towards another ahead of the group.

Love was anti-survival. Love was death. Love was hatred of any species stupid enough to practice it.

"Cylons find you evil, Baltar, because you are dysfunctional—a special case. You do not serve your own species, but you do have one Cylon virtue. You do not let concern for any individual detract from your larger purpose."

The dream sometimes ended there, with Baltar reliving his audience with Imperious Leader aboard the Cylon base star, surrounded by Centurions just waiting for the command to execute the lone human.

He got dizzy watching the searching eye in their helmets scanning for enemies and then settling on him, pulse rifles pointed at his head.

Sometimes Baltar wished that he could reach out and blind the universe. Then he could hide forever.

Beginning in the Ur cloud, the nightmares became increasingly more bizarre. Now that the battlestar *Galactica* orbited Paradis, it felt as if someone had pulled back a curtain to reveal more of the world that had been left behind. While all the other Colonials prepared to explore a new planet, Baltar was forced to look back. He didn't want to see what was there, leering at him as if to say that he could never escape.

The voice from his past—the voice of Imperious Leader—haunted his present: "Our purpose is no longer clear! We are nothing without one purpose. There is a breed of Cylons that would choose another purpose! This cannot be. There can be only unity in the Cylon Empire. Choice is anathema! There cannot be a revolt of Cylons. It's as if we're dying from a disgusting human cancer. Biological Cylons must not oppose technological Cylons!"

There was despair in a voice that had never before expressed such an emotion. "Not even a cogitator can solve the insoluble," it wailed. "The

problem is beyond the scope of ten Lucifers. What is this new force that would rise up in a biological Cylon to resist the absolute supremacy of a three-lobed leader? Can it be something you infected us with, Baltar? Were you a carrier of love?"

"How could I be," he defended himself, "when only a moment ago you were saying I have a Cylon virtue? If I'm a carrier, then *hatred* is my virus!"

"Explain!" demanded Imperious Leader. "There are contradictions, paradoxes, ironies. We do not appreciate such mental torment. Explain!"

Baltar didn't want to answer. It was his dream and he didn't have to answer if he didn't want to! Especially not when another face was forming to harass him with wicked questions. It was Count Iblis as the man had been thousands of yahren in the past. He was stroking a loathsome reptilian creature, his pet.

"You are not the greatest traitor to your kind," announced Iblis.

"That honor belongs to me. I found the planet Cylon and with genetic engineering and advanced cybernetics gave birth to the ultimate enemy of Man. How do you possibly compare to me?"

"I've never been in competition with you!" Baltar screamed. "Get out of my mind, damn you. Find someone else to haunt!"

Each time the dreams became more detailed and he woke up feeling worse, in cold sweats or with severe headaches.

This time he thought he was still dreaming because Athena was standing by his sickbed—Athena, whom he'd rather dream about than a Cylon civil war!

As if to reinforce the feeling that he was still in a dream, Athena said: "We have good news for you, Baltar. When you're fully recovered, we have a job for you. You're going to be a teacher."

"It's a red sun," said President Tigh, peering into a scanner on the bridge of the *Galactica*.

"An old sun," echoed Athena, checking out her monitor on the bridge of the Daedelus.

The battlestars were having a conference call. They always did when something was important. There was nothing more crucial than finding a temporary home for the exhausted and damaged Fleet.

"One day I will write a poem dedicated to hydrogen," said Dr. Salik wistfully, surrounded by his favorite scientific equipment.

Omegas, a bridge officer, exchanged glances with Rigel who took a break from keeping track of the many ships converging on this quadrant of space. Lately, the top science officer was behaving oddly. He wasn't as boring as he used to be when he just did his job.

Tigh was in a poetic mood as well. "What do you mean, doctor?" he prompted the older man.

Salik studied the screen showing the planet Paradis. The battlestars were moving into parking orbits that matched the planet's period of rotation. The period of analysis had begun, the fun part for the scientists.

Salik took advantage of his captive audience: "Paradis is a habitable planet, with evolved life forms, but the odds are against that. You see, when a star becomes a red giant, it swells up to many times its original size and routinely devours any planets close to it. Before it swelled, the planets closer in would have been in the habitable zone, and this planet would have been too far from the star to be congenial to life. So it has only become habitable since the sun entered its red giant phase, which means that life evolved here quickly. Or, it evolved elsewhere and traveled here, or was brought here, after the initial solar expansion."

"So what does this sun have to look forward to?" asked President Tigh.

Salik finished the impromptu lecture. "Impossible to say. Red giants can be extremely stable and last for a half-billion years or more. Or, they can go through cycles, shrinking down to the white dwarf stage, then expanding again to the red giant. There can be many of these cycles before the star ends its life. Given its size, I would say that it will end as a black dwarf—cold and dark. However, it might be more energetic than that, and end its life as a neutron star—impossibly dense and heavy."

"Let's not hang around for that," volunteered Troy, coming onto the bridge of the *Galactica*.

"We always find interesting planets," said Athena. "Maybe that's a good omen—maybe it means that ultimately we'll find Earth!"

Salik nodded. "When we do, I'll write my epic poem about hydrogen." Now Tigh and Athena exchanged glances. There was nothing to do but let the eminent scientist get it out of his system.

"Life has made a bargain with hydrogen, as well as carbon, nitrogen, oxygen and sulfur. My point is that it would be a bleak and empty universe without the hydrogen atom."

Tigh returned to the subject at hand. "Speaking of empty, Paradis is anything but!"

"There seems to be an equal amount of water and land," said someone's voice, deep in Salik's laboratory.

"That's promising," said Athena. "Maybe we won't have any more problems with hunger. There's been too much privation among our people. I'd rather face a thousand Centurions than starvation."

After their recent troubles, she spoke for all of them. Tigh pondered his screens. "There is life on Paradis. And now we will add ourselves to that

biosphere."

"There is no evidence of high technology," said Abhug, a recent addition to Salik's staff, an eager youth who spoke with a certain smugness.

"We are still scanning for different life forms—flora and fauna," said Athena. "Aren't you a bit premature with that assurance?"

The young scientist was unfazed. "The important thing is the lack of evidence that anyone's down there who could resist us. There are no satellites in orbit, no artificial spheres or visible architecture of any sort! There is no evidence on the surface of cities or weapons systems."

Troy got into the act. "You're still jumping to conclusions. They could be underground."

"Unlikely," countered Abhug. "With a hospitable environment, they would have no reason to go underground. Seems to me this planet is ripe for the picking, whether it's inhabited or not."

Tigh sighed. "Inform Commander Apollo of our current results. I hope no one needs to sleep any time soon. Our work is just beginning. I want to know everything that's down there."

"You mean before we check it out in person?" asked Athena with a smile.

Tigh had enjoyed a reputation for vigilance ever since he'd been a colonel. He added, "We know we can live down there. I want to know about any microorganisms that might threaten us. I also want to know if the place is as damned pristine as it appears because I don't think we should import any diseases we can avoid with proper treatment first.

"Basically, we need to do yahrens of work in the next few days. Anybody got a problem with that?"

No one did. "I appreciate your dedication," said the president. "And cheer up. Sleep is overrated."

This was one of the good times for the Viper pilots—they all had a job to do. Starbuck and Boomer and Bojay, Troy and Trays, Dalton, Sheba, and all the rest—now had a chance to show their mettle in atmospheric flight. Although they had racked up many more hours in space than in atmospheres, the long quest for Earth had led them to several planets where they'd had to hone their aerodynamic atmospheric flight skills.

Viper pilots adapted to anything and everything.

Apollo didn't begin the mission alone, but he wanted to go solo more than any other flyer. He was ambivalent about his emotions when it came to this. The responsible thing in a military operation was to hold functioning units together. The man in charge had a special responsibility to reign in the "loner" tendencies of all good fighters.

But those were rules for other times and places, before the Colonials were reduced in numbers and set adrift in the universe. Now there were only so many brave, able professionals to go around.

With Apollo giving the order, the Viper pilots split off from each other and began the exploration of Paradis.

With the constant hum of his apex pulsar engine penetrating into his bone marrow, Apollo grasped his navi-hilt and flew into the depths of the atmosphere. It felt good.

The last time he flew, it had been to do battle in the Ur cloud. Maneuvers in the cloud were the same as operating in space. Then he had accelerated toward battle, convinced it was all over for him when he saw the number of Cylon fighters bearing down.

Now he remembered that day in a place with no days. Whatever Paradis had to offer, the dangers couldn't begin to approach the level of risk in the Ur cloud. Paradis just had to be a vacation after that.

Apollo had promised himself that he would never be blinded in battle. When he had flown into the cloud, hundreds of flashing spots in front of his eyes suggested that fear of losing his sight was the least of his problems. Each spot had been a Cylon fighter!

The odds of survival had been small. When the Chitain attacked in force and inadvertently saved the Colonials, Apollo again appreciated what his father had taught him long ago.

"Don't believe that the enemy of your enemy is your friend," Adama had said when Apollo was only fifteen. "Wisdom lies in recognizing what makes someone your enemy in the first place. If they wish to destroy you even if you have done them no harm, they will be equally unjust with others. They will make other enemies because it is in their nature. Form your alliances on the basis of self-defense, not self-delusion! And don't make the ultimate mistake of acting as your enemy does."

These were good words to carry with him as Apollo checked out this new world. Adama had spoken thus to his son before the Great Betrayal forced him to lead his people across the universe.

Apollo tried to live up to Adama's standards as the burden of command came to rest on his shoulders. The Cylons taught a stern lesson. There was no moral confusion in resisting an enemy that sought genocide.

Adama faced the harshness of life when he'd lost his son, Zac. The loss of Zac had hurt Apollo as well, but the current Commander of the Fleet had lost his father as well as his brother. With each loss, his commitment to his sister grew. For Apollo, resistance to evil was entirely personal.

The Cylons made it easy to treat lesser opponents with a certain degree of fairness—to put things in perspective. Adama's advice had served Apollo well when dealing with Jinkrat and a rebellion born of desperation. Starving men aren't the same as Cylons or Chitains.

As he explored Paradis, he hoped there would be no enemies. That would make for a nice change.

Down below he witnessed the pleasant cloud formations in the planetary atmosphere. They reminded him of the surreal experience of the Ur cloud. As the Cylons and Chitain destroyed each other, a wave of energy had been released that tore an opening in space-time. That fortuitous cataclysm had allowed humanity to return to the universe of stars and galaxies.

Once he was safely aboard the *Galactica* again, Apollo took time for a brief meditation. His thoughts could have been encapsulated in this prayer:

"Let us resist the enemy without becoming like him. Let us find a new source of tylium and other supplies. Let us enjoy the good fortune of finally escaping the Cylons. And if it's not asking too much, the next time I take my Viper into a cloud, let it be composed of water vapor in the atmosphere of a livable planet."

Sometimes prayers were answered.

The thin strands of wispy cloud racing by the Viper were all about life as opposed to the blank negation of the Ur cloud. Apollo liked to be in a thick soup of life. The current reports of the scientists were tantalizing, to say the least.

Salik reported evidence of a humanoid life form that was in a primitive stage. In other words, they didn't have high-tech. It was too soon to estimate

population size or draw any conclusions on how widely distributed the humanoids were over the planet.

The Colonials could be here for some considerable time, given the disastrous condition of the fleet and all the work that needed doing. Apollo hoped they could keep culture clash to a minimum.

But at this very moment, he didn't want to think about that. For a few centari he didn't want to think about the mission, even though he had a specific destination he'd kept from the other Viper pilots.

For a few blessed moments he wanted nothing but to pretend that he was a tourist. When he was in resonance with his inner light he had no desire to conquer new worlds. He only wanted to see them.

So Apollo descended from the stratosphere into the lower clouds. They formed an ethereal landscape with snowy cliffs rising out of a vast continent that wasn't there. The red sun's light gave them a burnished quality. For one mad micron he felt that he could step out of his Viper and walk on them.

He didn't have to. The promise of real continents lay below. He would go down and gaze upon solid ground, mindful that on alien worlds appearances could be as misleading as any cloudscape.

Breaking through the lower cloud banks, the first thing he noticed was a riot of color. Then his warrior training zeroed in on what seemed to be flashes off a metal surface—but closer scrutiny revealed smooth boulders reflecting the sunlight.

Descending lower, he had a much better view of the forest. A river also reflected sunlight. The sight of fresh water was as refreshing as if he'd just drunk from a bubbling fountain. There were trees and grasses. There were flying animals that were the first cousins of birds and flowering plants. The river rolled on underneath him, a blue ribbon leading into a deep ravine.

He did not linger over the valley but leveled off and flew on, traversing a vast plain toward a purple mountain range. The experts had told him the atmosphere was rich in oxygen and that the air was safe to breathe. But they could not describe the morning fresh scent that Apollo let into his cockpit as soon as he was low enough to depressurize and allow the planet's air to ventilate his craft.

There was always the risk of disease-bearing microorganisms but nothing out of the ordinary showed up in the initial tests. They would have to take the risk as they so often did. Considering the different environments the Colonials had survived in up to this point, the risk was probably greater for the new worlds they entered than for themselves.

Gar'Tokk had taught Apollo to be philosophical about such matters. The Noman had also instructed him in ways to respect new worlds as much as could be reconciled with the exigencies of survival.

After what the Colonials did to the Nomen, Apollo did well to listen.

A sudden gust of fierce wind made the Viper dance. It helped remind him that he wasn't merely sightseeing. He used his comlink and communicated with Athena.

"I'm headed for the coordinates where you said there is evidence of the greatest concentration of humanoid habitation. I'm counting on your assessment that I won't be running into a ground-to-air missile!"

She chuckled. "If they shoot anything at you, it won't be more than a spear or an arrow."

He smiled inside his helm. "That might not be as trivial as you think. I've seen some pretty sturdy trees down here."

"Have you seen any sturdy animals?"

"Feathered flyers that look like birds, a flock of 'em. They were pretty large."

"Were they pretty, too?" Athena asked.

"Yeah. Beautiful!"

"Koren wants to know if you run into any monsters."

"Tell my boy that when we encounter monsters they usually come in our size, fly spaceships and shoot at us. I'd trade them all in for some gentle giants that just want to eat us!"

"I know what you mean," his sister agreed. "Analysis suggests this planet is rich in minerals and energy, not to mention natural foods."

Apollo bit his lower lip. "Sounds like we're going to be doing the eating."

The Viper flew on, a lonely piece of advanced technology speeding across the surface of a pristine, sleeping planet. Against the face of the planet the immense battlestars were specks, slowly joined by a host of smaller metallic containers carrying the last remnants of humanity.

They had escaped from an enemy that lived and died by all things metallic. The Cylons were nothing without their machines and had become part machine. But human beings could live outside a metal cocoon. They could walk away from their metal hives and breathe the air of Paradis, eat the food and drink the water.

To Apollo, freedom was more than a condition of the spirit. It was also a physical thing. It was about choices. It could also be a place.

What would the natives be like? He had to admit to himself a feeling of disappointment that there was intelligent native life. But better to discover

and deal with them now than after the Colonials began to live up to their name by colonizing the planet.

The inhabitants might be primitive by the standards of space travelers—but to an animal the gulf separating a battlestar from a mud hut was negligible.

Apollo checked the latitude and longitude that Athena had provided. Shortly, he saw the settlement in the distance. The small structures had an elegance of line that was simple and clean. The moment he saw them he made his decision.

It would be wrong to fly over the village and frighten the natives. That was not the way to meet a new people. He didn't exactly expect them to fall down in a swoon and treat the Viper as a chariot from the gods. Apollo chose not to meet them in that fashion because it would be bad manners.

He landed.

He left the Viper and removed his helm.

It was good to stand in this verdant world without any kind of artificial life support. Bending down, he picked up a leaf, savoring the fresh odor in his nostrils and resisting an impulse to put it in his mouth.

The village waited for him over a rise. As his boots crunched twigs and leaves with every step, he considered again the reasons for his decision. The Natives were not just pre-high-tech. Neither the battlestar's scans nor his brief reconnoitering had turned up evidence of any armies.

All indicators suggested peaceful inhabitants.

But he wanted to be certain. In another moment he would make first contact. However it turned out, the responsibility rested on his shoulders alone.

Suddenly he heard a strange sound up ahead, the lowing of a gigantic horn. Then something touched him on the shoulder. He spun around. Who could have gotten behind him without making a sound?

He turned to look at the tall figure now standing before him. The humanoid was a good two feet taller than Apollo, which also made him taller than Gar'Tokk. But in every other respect, the native could be a Noman.

"This is a small universe," Apollo muttered under his breath as he extended his hand in greeting.

Chapter Two

You look like Athena!"

At first the young girl did not realize that Baltar was addressing her. One glance at his expression changed that. She could feel herself blush.

"You mean I look like Commander Athena?" She barely got the words out, proud that she had not stuttered.

"I never lie about important things," he assured her, "such as the charms of someone kind enough to be my nurse. Did you know that Athena has actually visited me here? She has a job for me."

The young nurse hadn't expected a conversation like this in sickbay. Not knowing what to say, she fluffed up his pillow and said nothing.

"I wouldn't dream of boring you," he said, and then winced.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I used that dirty word. Dreams! They are giving me the most horrible headaches in history. Can you give me something to help with my head?"

"I'd like to, but I'm not your doctor. Haven't you told anyone about the headaches?"

He nodded. "They don't give me anything strong enough."

"Well, I won't lie to you and say I can do anything about it."

He clapped his hands. "Excellent! You don't lie either. As for me, I only prevaricate when the subject at hand is power and destruction, life and death, and other such ephemera."

She laughed nervously. She had been warned about Baltar. It was a kind of honor providing medical attention to someone as dangerous as the man who had once betrayed the entire human race and sacrificed his home world of Caprica to the Cylon enemy. But this was the same man who sustained injuries putting down a dangerous coup led by Sire Aron.

If Baltar had not acted, she might not be alive right now and tending his wounds. Baltar had saved Apollo and Starbuck and the others whom the girl considered personal heroes. And of course he'd once been a member of the Council of Twelve! Naturally, the girl was reticent in his presence.

"What is your name, young lady?" he prompted her to talk to him some more.

She blushed again and almost whispered, "Elayna."

"Thank you for treating me so well."

He had not spoken falsely. She did remind him of Athena, Apollo's regal sister and a woman he could not get out of his mind. It amused him to think how horrified they would all be if they knew how he really felt about Athena. Everyone would pronounce the idea of such a union as impossible and insulting, Athena first.

But Baltar had learned one thing in his interesting life. The future is unpredictable. The wheel of fate turns. The one certainty is that people most certain of the future are certain to be disappointed.

As he watched the young nurse busy herself with attending to the tubes in his arms and reading the dials on his life support, he comforted himself with different scenarios of the future. What if he should regain his position of authority on the Council? With wealth and power in his hands once again, what would Athena think of him then?

Baltar believed that there was no creature more practical and less romantic than a woman. He probably thought this because of his personal experiences. He had prevailed with beautiful and powerful women in his past, but they were never at their best when he was in their lives.

Baltar made a lousy hero. But he was the kind of villain who had a certain panache. He had his moments.

"How have you been sleeping?" asked Elayna, breaking his reverie.

"How thoughtful of you to ask. I dream a lot, as I complained earlier, so I assume that I must be sleeping some of the time."

She wrinkled her cute little nose. "I never know when you're serious."

He always rose to a challenge. "I'll be serious. What can you tell me about the new planet? It's all they talk about in here; but the feeble invalids in here are the last to know anything of substance."

She ignored the insult to his fellow patients. "Paradis is beautiful," she said. "When you're feeling better, you can see it from the Celestial Chamber."

"I've heard there's much life on the planet."

"Oh, yes! It's lush and green and blue. It's teeming with life."

"Too bad," said Baltar to her surprise.

"Now I know that you're joking," she said sternly, allowing herself to pull off one of his bandages with more force than was necessary.

He brightened at the abuse. This girl was worth knowing! "But I'm completely in earnest," he said. "Whenever we run into other life forms we find nothing but trouble. I hope that from now on we find nothing but dead planets with the basic resources we need. But no more living worlds,

please! Give me a barren, empty universe where we can finally be left alone."

She finished tending to her patient. "Very well, Baltar, you can start with me!"

The young nurse turned on her heel and left him alone.

"They call themselves the Gamon," said Starbuck. "They could be first cousins of the Nomen. You have any theories on that?"

His bartender didn't have a good answer. He liked Starbuck as a customer and he was a good listener. He especially liked it when the warrior talked about his daughter, Dalton. The bartender had a daughter, too.

He poured the warrior another drink. Starbuck had a remarkable capacity for grog. A good bartender knows when his customer has had enough; but he also knows when the guy is good for more, the true art of his trade.

"I've been down there, you know," said Starbuck.

"Of course."

"I was one of the first."

"Of course."

Starbuck threw back his head and took half the glass of grog in one go. "You want to hear something funny?" he said, wiping foam from his lips. "I haven't met any of 'em yet. I've seen them from a distance. Sometimes I think they don't want me too close to new aliens. Not at first. Maybe they like to hold me in reserve. We've been burned too many times in the past. I don't trust strangers as much as I once did."

The bartender nodded. "I know what you mean."

Encouraged, Starbuck continued: "None of what I'm saying is confidential which is why I can talk about it."

The bartender had heard this sort of thing before. "I appreciate that," he said as he wiped the counter and kept his eye on a new socialator. She was quite striking.

Starbuck followed the bartender's gaze and sized up the girl himself. "She's nice. Her name's Morgana."

They watched her chatting up a well-to-do customer overflowing with cubits.

Times had changed for Starbuck. Caught between his feelings for Athena and Cassie, he hardly knew which way to turn. His love for Cassie was deep but he didn't want to spoil things between her and Apollo. Athena excited him more than any other woman in his life but he was tired of responding to her constant demands. He suspected that she loved him more than he loved her.

That's why grog was good. He finished his drink and thought about how it had been in the good old days, when he when he would have taken a woman like Morgana down to see a sunset on the new world... and stayed for the sunrise.

"I'm looking forward to when I first step foot on Paradis," the bartender volunteered. "I want to stand on solid ground and breathe the kind of air they have down there."

"The air is sweet," agreed Starbuck from firsthand knowledge. "It's sweet as a full glass of ambrosa, a green place, a pleasure."

The bartender was so impressed with Starbuck's poetry that he refilled the glass without being asked. He didn't think to ask if there might be a military threat on Paradis and Starbuck wouldn't answer if he knew. The

official position of the Council had not yet been stated but was expected real soon now.

They were still getting acquainted with the planet and coming to grips with the miracle that they have been saved again. Business as usual.

Suddenly the bartender became intoxicated on thoughts of his own future. "I want to go down there," he said. "I want to be outside right before a thunderstorm. I want to feel a change of pressure in my ears. I'll smell the air and it will be different than what we breathe up here."

Starbuck stopped drinking his grog. He wasn't used to hearing a bartender hold forth. It was usually the other way round.

"I know what you mean," said Starbuck and he meant it.

Emboldened, the man went on. "I want to see lots of clouds, all bunched up in front of me. I want to feel the wind on my face and arms and legs. I'll taste electricity in the air and raindrops on my tongue."

The bartender stopped, seemed to remember where he was and started wiping the counter again. Starbuck felt the silence between them as if the man's imagined electricity had just seeped into the bar.

"You want it bad," said the veteran of more space battles than even he could remember. "I know how you feel."

"Yes," said the man who had served more drinks than he could remember. "I'd pay any price for it. I never realized until this moment what the new planet means to me. I'd do anything to have a life down there."

Starbuck finished his drink. He glanced one last time at the gorgeous Morgana. Her red hair flamed in a way that made him think of the star they now orbited along with their new planet and its promise of renewed life. She'd just made her conquest and was leading her portly client out of the bar.

"You know what?" Starbuck asked.

"What?"

"If that citizen has any sense, he'll take her down to Paradis not to see the sunset but the sunrise!"

"Breakfast is always good," the bartender agreed, wiping the counter focused again on his world of serious drinking and casual liaisons.

"Wake me when it's over," said Boomer.

"Then who will wake me?" asked Troy.

"How much is it worth it to you if I stay awake?" Cassie wanted to know.

There was nothing more boring and bureaucratic than a meeting of the Council. There was a limit to how many stats and projections anyone could stand.

But then came the special moment. The Council broadcast from its chamber a formal statement honoring Commander Cain and the sacrifice of the *Pegasus* in the battle of Kobol, hopefully the final war for a people that had suffered much.

Everyone wanted to honor Sheba as well, Cain's daughter. She had agreed to give a speech.

A picture of Sheba filled the screens of everyone watching from orbit and everyone with monitors on the planet. She stood on a grassy hilltop next to a tree and placed a wreath of flowers on a headstone. The camera zoomed in and showed the inscription:

IN MEMORY OF COMMANDER CAIN, THE HERO OF KOBOL

Despite long hours and exhaustion, no one wanted to sleep now.

Sheba's statement was succinct.

"We all know that my father was a warrior," she said, "and sometimes many thought that there was no other side to him. His reputation for recklessness followed him more relentlessly than the Cylons. But he had the same dream as Commander Adama and his son. He wanted us to be safe. Never forget that. He didn't kill for the sake of destruction. Everything he ever did, even when he made ill-conceived alliances, was for the one purpose of guaranteeing our safety!"

The applause burst like a wave throughout the ships and over the new world that was Cain's final resting place. It even sounded sincere in the Council chamber.

Back in that chamber, it was time to return to business. Normally, Commander Apollo didn't care for the slow deliberations of the Twelve. There had been too many times when a military emergency demanded quick action but the politicians seemed woefully impervious to that reality. Their procedures were carefully designed to try the patience of anyone burdened with actual facts and a workable plan.

This occasion was a bit different. There were many issues to be decided. And Apollo wasn't entirely certain where they were headed.

He looked over at Cassie, who had dragged herself from long nights in the med-lab. He didn't like her working this hard when she was pregnant. He didn't like the confusion over the issue of fatherhood any better. She still believed he was the father. He couldn't decide if he believed Baltar's fantastic claims about the essence of Iblis being the true progenitor.

The pregnancy was starting to show. Apollo caught Starbuck staring at the woman that they all knew he still loved. Their personal lives were so complicated that maybe it would take an entire bureaucracy to sort it out!

There were more pressing matters to concern all of them here and now. They were all tired but they had to soldier on. Maybe while hunting up new sources of tylium they'd find another rare mineral to recharge their human batteries.

Not surprisingly, there was disagreement about procedure. Apollo and Starbuck had a silent meeting of minds on that subject. Arguments over protocol made Starbuck want to return to the bar but the situation gave Apollo other ideas. He'd like nothing better than to slip into his *dreamwalking* state where his subconscious would speak directly to his conscious mind and form a gestalt.

The only problem with ultimate consciousness was that it had no application to practical politics. Reluctantly, Apollo stuck with the matters at hand.

A wealthy council member finally said something of interest. "We have talked ourselves blue in the face about destroying ships that are past the point of repair so that we may cannibalize them for repairs on the salvageable craft—and then utilize the remaining materials for temporary habitats on the new planet. And I know that some of us plan more permanent structures as well. My point is that I've yet to see a final plan with objective criteria about just which ships are to be destroyed and when. Not to mention in which order."

Starbuck did a low whistle. "Now that's a mouthful," he said.

The statement inspired a round of mumbling and accusations, just one more example of how the military was forced to make the decisions that so often paralyzed civilian authority. Apollo was about to intercede when an architect named Ryis took the floor.

Ryis presented a detailed plan. He'd already mustered support from several influential Council members. He had no problem with destroying obsolete ships. Maybe this time the Council would follow a logical course of action without having its collective arm twisted by the warriors.

Apollo felt oddly detached from the proceedings. Maybe that's why he wasn't as impatient as was normally the case with him. There was no clear path in front of him. Maybe he was only at his best when facing life-and-death crises.

Wouldn't it be nice if Paradis didn't force him to make those kinds of choices?

But he knew better than to expect a vacation from the responsibilities of command. His inner light never blinded him to reality.

Finally, it was his turn to speak. Since the warriors had proven themselves as recently as the Ur cloud, civilians were happy for him to speak. There were no revolutions and the external enemy had no inkling where the Colonials had fled.

"We will be here for some time," he concluded. "This planet seems to have everything we need. The Native population welcomes us as guests. We are fortunate that the Gamon have a similar language to the Nomen. Communications are proceeding well."

"What about tylium?" shouted someone from the general population who were participating in this historic meeting.

"Preliminary tests are promising," volunteered President Tigh. Apollo relinquished the floor and neither objected to the casual manner of the questioner.

Tigh elaborated on what mattered. "Bear in mind that we won't have to synthesize our basic needs on Paradis. The planet offers us a rich harvest in

foodstuffs."

"There may be sources of new medicines," Cassie whispered to Starbuck, who leaned closer to catch her words.

Tigh had awfully good hearing, a prerequisite for his job. "All sorts of things, from housing to medical supplies, will be ours for the taking on this new planet. And I'm confident that we will eventually locate enough sources of Tylium to feed our engines. We won't have to worry about paying black market prices when the Gamon don't even know what tylium is!"

The President had tried for levity but he achieved the opposite result. Several voices cursed Baltar who, after all, built his original fortune dealing in the scarce supplies of the essential fuel. Even before his betrayal, the man had made enemies without number.

Apollo regained the floor. "We will find the tylium we need and be good neighbors to the Gamon. I give you my solemn pledge that we will repair the fleet. The Marron drive will once again return us to the stars!"

He intended his final words to be stirring but there was no applause. Only Ryis smiled, and there was something unpleasant about his expression.

Chapter Three

They invited GarTokk to run. He accepted it as the honor that was intended. The meetings had gone well and Apollo gave silent approval with a solemn nod to his friend and ally. So GarTokk began his run down a path into the woods, a lush forest that called to his blood.

The Gamon understood GarTokk right down to the root of his being. He felt as if he'd come home. But there was something about the natives of Paradis he could not fathom, a mystery in the depths of their life. His fellow Nomen recognized the same barrier. They were less concerned about it. They had no interest in trying to breach that barrier between the natives and the Colonials. Many had yet to forgive GarTokk for his friendship with a Colonial.

Whatever the future held, there was no denying the empathy that existed between the natives of Paradis and the remnants of the Nomen who had come to their world.

GarTokk did not worry about anything now. His heart beat in his massive chest and his blood flowed as the river in the distance did the same, beckoning with its eternal motion. The Borellian Noman breathed deeply. His lungs and legs worked together as if one pair followed the exact rhythms of the other. He felt as if he would never tire.

The wind stirred his great mane of hair. His nostrils flared at scents that were almost addictive. He jumped over sturdy tree roots as if they were delicate flowers he did not want to bruise. He ran for the sheer pleasure, not

hunting animal or foe, not forced to keep track of every motion as he did in battle.

Nomen were capable of joy. But their comrades rarely noticed because it ran so deep and did not give tongue to emotion. The bright and wonderful day was happiness unto itself. The bloated, red sun was like a lantern in the sky promising a celebration.

Paradis whispered to Gar'Tokk as if to say: *This is a place where you can be yourself again. You do not belong on the endless, pointless quest for Earth. You are not meant to live in outer space. The wide open universe is a lie because you are trapped inside a little metal can. Here you can be free.*

Even when the great trees closed in, he felt that the walls of the forest did not imprison him, the way the walls of a spaceship must. All that he need do was drive his legs forward, pump his heart, billow his lungs and soon those green walls would come to an end, the shade would vanish, and —

He came to an abrupt stop in a clearing, face to face with one of the planet's inhabitants. The only sound was the thumping of his heart. The creature was twice as big as he and looked a little bit like a lupus except for the head. Violet eyes regarded the Noman from flexible stalks. The mouth was at the end of a flexible tube. The hair covering the body was longer than a lupus or a daggit but similar to both and a golden brown.

The creature and Gar'Tokk stood stock still except for the furious motion of their eyes as they studied each other. Making a sound like air escaping from a balloon, the animal finally turned away from the invader and resumed feeding itself.

A variety of insects formed a multicolored cloud around the beast's head. Something must be attracting the bugs. With great deliberation the

creature protruded its mouth tube into the bulk of the insects and sucked them up.

Some of the insects were as large as a human hand. The living shapes disappeared, leaving behind fluttering memories of crimson and turquoise, of bright green and dark purple. The animal seemed to be in no hurry. Sated, it turned away even though a third of the insects were left.

One of them flew into GarTokk's grizzled face. He reached out and gingerly held a yellow wing between his large fingers. A whiff of something sweet surprised him. Now he recognized the source of some of the interesting scents he had noticed when running on the forest path—as if the scents were flowers of the air, seeding the sky with perfume.

This planet was too tempting to be real.

He released the wing and watched a blur of yellow flit out of sight. Gar'Tokk suddenly felt thirsty. He saw that the insect headed toward a source of water much nearer than the silver string of river in the distance.

A brief jog and he was at a small creek. A clump of trees provided shade and he wondered if the reddish boles owed something to the radiance of the red sun.

He dipped his hand in cool water and let his fingers rest there for a moment before bringing a drink to his mouth. It tasted better than anything he'd ever had. Greedily, he scooped up more mouthfuls. He was about to dive in and treat himself to a swim when something gave him pause.

He saw his own reflection.

For the first time in his life, there was something wrong about his reflection. He witnessed raw desire for Paradis on his face, reflected back to him from a pool that he suddenly felt he was defiling.

There was something cruel around the corners of his mouth. There was something blank about his eyes. What was this planet doing to him?

No sooner did the thought cross his mind than he rejected it. The proper question had a different subject and object: what was he going to do to the planet?

Gar'Tokk cut his run short even though he still felt the elation down deep where his mind couldn't spoil it. He retraced his steps but this time he walked at a deliberately slow pace, paying attention to every detail—the leaves, the shrubs, the emerald lizards darting out of sight.

When he returned, Apollo was completing his meeting with Yarto, the native leader who had met him as the first human to set foot on Paradis. They were developing a workable sign language; but it was no substitute for Gar'Tokk's facility with much of the Gamon language... and a growing telepathic link.

"I don't know what we would have done without you," said Apollo, drawing Gar'Tokk aside. "There are just enough similarities between your language and the natives for us to begin genuine communication."

"Yes," said Gar'Tokk. "There is a link."

They walked alone and in silence, finally stopping to examine a simple water-wheel that was used to irrigate rows of small, neat crops. "No wonder we didn't detect any technology from space," said the commander. "Their technology doesn't go beyond simple subsistence-level agriculture."

Gar'Tokk pointed up the hill where a large, curved horn suggested a hunter-gatherer past, or possibly active present. "They choose," he said simply.

Apollo thought about it. "They blew that to welcome me when I first made contact. The leader of this clan came out to meet me. Yarto decided

the same as I did. First contact should not be made by young warriors."

"What did Starbuck say to that?" asked the Noman.

Apollo was stunned. Had Gar'Tokk made a joke? He added his bit: "He should be flattered that we still think of him as young."

Gar'Tokk let the silence gather before he added, "What we've lived through, ages us all."

Apollo asked the necessary question. "Remember when I said that you could leave us at the first habitable planet?"

Gar'Tokk nodded but decided to say nothing. They walked to the perimeter of the village. The red sun was beginning to set, streaking the horizon with colors so bright that it seemed as if the sky bled.

"I love this place," said Apollo.

"I, too," Gar'Tokk agreed.

"May we be good guests."

Gar'Tokk smiled grimly. "You always prove yourself a leader by understanding more."

That sentence was a profound speech for the Noman. Apollo raised an eyebrow, inquiring, "What inspires that remark?"

His comrade was frank, as always. "We have been invited as guests only."

Apollo watched the sun's continued descent. The first stars of night began to appear. They reminded him of the fleet in orbit overhead.

"We could be here a long time. I hope that our hosts will be patient."

Gar'Tokk gazed at the stars and hated them. "So long as we remember that we're guests."

As they walked back toward the center of the village, Apollo asked, "A moment ago when I was describing the technological level of the Gamon, you said that they *chose*. What do you mean?"

Gar'Tokk shrugged. "Some live as they do because they have no choice. I believe that the Gamon choose."

Apollo might have pursued the matter but they had been rediscovered by their hosts. Yarto, flanked by two younger males, approached the visitors. He carried an object wrapped in black cloth. A few words exchanged with Gar'Tokk made it official.

Apollo didn't need a brief translation to recognize a gift when he received one. He unwrapped the object and touched the covers of a very old book.

He didn't have to get past the cover to be amazed. The symbols and markings were familiar enough. The insignia on the cover said it all.

"You see this," said Apollo to his companion.

"Yes," said Gar'Tokk.

The ancient tome must have been written by the Thirteenth Tribe!

High above Paradis was a man named Ryis. In many respects he was the same as many other Colonials. He was tired of being cooped up in spaceships. He was afraid of being hunted by Cylons and the Chitain. He was angry over shortages and politics.

In common with other Colonials, he saw Paradis as a refuge from the dangers and privations of the great exodus. But he saw something else as well.

The first time he beheld Paradis he had a vision that he only shared with Tillis, his passionate and devoted lover. She virtually worshiped him

and he enjoyed unburdening his soul on a receptive audience of one.

"The Council is finally moving in the right direction," he said, stroking her cheek.

"When do they arrive at your desired destination?" she asked, playfully unbuttoning his shirt.

"That will take time," he admitted, slipping off her boots.

"I have plenty of time," she breathed, nibbling his ear.

He pulled her face to his and kissed her. "That's what I like about you," he said.

"What is it, *exactly*?" Tillis asked with a moan, her fingers beginning to undo his belt.

"I'll tell you later," he promised.

Later came too soon for her. But she accepted Ryis, impatience and all. Maybe after he finished the lecture he would be ready for an encore with her. She could even pretend that she was experiencing the same romantic encounter. For Ryis, everything was in neat, airtight compartments, a life made up of discreet events.

He placed pictures in front of her. "Do you know what these are?" he asked.

She wished that he'd just tell her already! However, if he wanted to play teacher then these photographs spoke for themselves.

"They show scenes from the planet," she answered dutifully.

"Yes. Tell me what you see more exactly."

"Well, I see lakes and hills. I see trees."

He pointed at a mountain of stone. "Do you see those streaks of color?" he asked.

She saw a rusty brown color. "Yes, does it mean something?"

He ran his hand over the picture with more passion than he had lavished on her thigh. "It's iron ore. This planet is rich in minerals. I don't even need the data from the scientists. All I need is two eyes in my head."

Waving the pictures around as if they might be weapons, he persisted with the lesson. "What do you think of Paradis?"

She felt as if she were in her formal class in astro-navigation. "It's a beautiful planet," she said, detecting a slight sneer from Ryis even as the wrong words escaped her mouth.

"What do you want me to say?" she asked bluntly, attempting to keep the irritation out of her voice.

"It's what I want you to see! I envision a different beauty, the one I can make myself, wrenched out of the wilderness."

He reached under the bed and pulled out a small box she'd never noticed before. "I've saved this for a special occasion," he announced grandly and produced a bottle of ambrosa.

"Where did you get that?" she asked.

"I've had it for a while," he said, not answering her at all. "We prize this exquisite liquor because it's rare. We wouldn't feel the same if the rivers of Paradis flowed with the stuff."

"Oh, I don't know," she said, taking the offered glass.

"Paradis is my opportunity," he said. "I propose a toast. To the opportunity that comes once in a lifetime!"

She was feeling more relaxed because of the alcohol and forgot that Ryis was working himself up. She blurted out, "Paradis will be a nice holiday."

"Holiday?" he echoed her.

"Holiday?" he mocked her.

"Holiday!!" he almost choked on the word.

"It's not a holiday," she retreated. Things weren't going well. Usually she could get him past his bad moods; but she wasn't sure what to do with him when he was in a good mood. He was drurik on something other than ambrosa.

"Paradis is a return to real life," he crowed. "We're through with running all over space with these adolescent warriors lording it over us. All we have to do is make sure that they get fewer supplies and resources, as we get more and more!"

"Resources for what exactly?" she dared to ask, ducking just in case.

"I'm an architect," he exploded. "I was torn from my home world and set adrift in space all because of that stupid war. Now we've found a virgin planet. I'll split the trees and blow up the hills. I can build a whole world! We have an entire population without housing. Paradis is an architect's dream."

"But what will the Council decide?" she asked. "Apollo says that we should only stay here as long as required to get back under way."

Ryis laughed. "Do you have any idea how long that will take? We were near the end, my girl. We were running out of everything when those alien monsters found us again. We've been given a second chance against all the odds."

He jumped back on the bed and kissed her. "The people are going to love it down there," he said, coming up for air. "I'll make sure they love it. They'll never want to leave."

He lifted her up and sang out, "As far as I'm concerned, we've found Earth!"

Chapter Four

They came down to the planet, arriving in groups large and small. Some came alone. Viewed from the outside, the human migration seemed chaotic. But there was order.

The dismantling of the larger ships in orbit began. Heat shields and mini-thrusters were used to get these pieces to the surface of Paradis. In some cases, space vessels were combined instead of dismantled. One engine could carry the remnants of what had once been proud vessels before they were transformed into surrealistic constructions drifting in space.

The Colonials had originated on many different worlds, with diverse cultures, and, among other things, they differed in their traditions for the disposition of the dead. And many had died in all the yahren of their long exodus.

Not all had been given burial in space. Some had bequeathed their remains to the medical staff, a melancholy task headed up by Dr. Wilker. Some had been cremated and the ashes kept. Now these loved ones would be given burial in the earth of the new world, as the body of Cain had been laid to rest.

On the surface of Paradis, Starbuck watched with keen interest as a group of families tore ragged gashes into what had once had been their spaceborne living quarters, now destined to be redesigned as a house firmly rooted in the ground of a world that seemed to welcome them unconditionally. He was joined by an old friend.

"You haven't been trying to avoid me, have you?" asked Athena.

He loved the curl of her lip and raised eyebrow as she teased him. He felt as if he could watch her face forever, enjoying every contour of her profile and drinking in the luster of her eyes. But there were times when he could do without the words coming out of her perfectly shaped mouth. Those were times when he couldn't forget that she was Apollo's sister, not something he wanted to dwell upon.

Basically, Starbuck didn't like to argue with her. He always felt that he was losing no matter what was said.

"You know how busy we've all been," he said, instantly struck by how lame his words sounded.

She put her arm in his as gracefully as if they were about to attend an elegant banquet. "You don't ever have to lie to me," she said. There was no anger in her voice. "We're warriors, Starbuck. You never have to justify your priorities to me."

He nodded grimly. "I know what you mean," he said. "I've been watching the civilians work. I offered to help but they said they'd feel better if I stood guard duty."

"I've just come from seeing Sheba and Boomer who are overseeing the deconstruction of some of our military ships that have overwhelming damage."

"I guess we have an easier task," said Apollo. "Somehow I'd rather watch these old civilian crates bite the dust."

Athena took in her surroundings. They were in a clearing. She couldn't get over how tall the native trees were. There were so many of them. She breathed deeply and felt almost dizzy from the tangy air. And the birds were something to behold as well.

"There doesn't seem much need for a military presence down here," she said.

He pursed his lips in thought. "We can never be sure about that," he said. "After all the things we've lived through, we know that nothing can be taken for granted."

"Do you think it's possible we'll never see them again?" she asked.

"You mean the Cylons?" Starbuck said.

"Heads up!" shouted a young man as part of a bulkhead came loose and fell near a little girl at play. Another young man rushed to the child's side, making certain that she was all right. Then he took her to her mother and scolded the woman for not being more careful with her child.

Athena and Starbuck had been too far away to do anything but witness the near-tragedy and heave a sigh of relief.

"There are always dangers," he observed. "But people can handle most of them. The question is do they need us when Cylons aren't around."

"You know the answer to that," she said sternly. "We won't be on this planet forever. But even if we did stay, we can't take safety for granted. We've fought many dangers besides the Cylons."

Starbuck sat on the grass and crossed his legs, gesturing her to join him. If Starbuck liked to avoid arguments, Athena found it difficult to resist her dashing lover's manner. He was the first man who had ..ever been able to make her truly relax. Not even the wiles of a Baltar could disturb her special moments of peace when she and Starbuck connected.

"What do you think of the natives?" he asked her.

She shrugged. "To tell you the truth, I've only had brief contacts. I don't know what I think yet, other than they seem peaceful."

"Too peaceful," was his terse reply. Her wrinkled brow inspired him to go on. "Athena, they're too good to be true. I mean, if they only put up a little resistance! My warrior blood isn't boiling. It's room temperature."

Her slender fingers worked their way up his arm. "There are other ways to warm the blood," she said playfully.

But his mind wouldn't leave him alone. He held her head in his hands and asked the question: "Have you seen any native women?"

"What?" she asked, regaining herself.

"Have you seen any Gamon women?"

"No, but that doesn't mean they aren't here." She tried to make light of his observation. "Naturally, you would notice something like that."

"I'm serious."

"Maybe they keep their females hidden from strangers. That would mean they aren't as trusting as they seem. You should be pleased!"

He wasn't.

They resumed watching the Colonials. They didn't speak for a long time.

The people from space didn't beat their spears into farm implements, but they changed many other things. Sometimes they rushed to make a change before they had time to think about it.

When a Gamon communicated a suggestion to a Galactican, it was always with good intentions. After all, they knew their own world.

But Colonials were always suspicious of advice from the locals. They had been attacked and betrayed so many times that it was a perfectly reasonable reaction. But when they relaxed into understanding that the natives really meant to help them, another reaction set in.

Instead of fear, most Colonials suffered from a sense of superiority. It was not conscious. They didn't say that they were better, or act unkindly toward their hosts. There was simply no recognition that they were guests on Paradis.

"We have weapons these poor beings would never understand," said a man who wanted to be a farmer.

"If they knew what we could do to them, they'd probably treat us as gods," answered his wife.

But a young engineer didn't agree. There were always exceptions. "They've seen our flying ships and that didn't make them fall down in a faint. I don't think blowing up a village would make them worship us."

The would-be farmer and his wife looked hurt that the engineer had imposed himself into their expression of raw emotion. They didn't want to think about what they had actually said. They were too busy to *think*. They were honest people with work to do and they turned their backs rather than engage in a debate.

More Colonials were like the couple than the engineer.

Usually when a Gamon spoke to a settler it was to offer advice about the region in which the native had spent his entire life. Smart Colonials overcame their sense of superiority long enough to listen. Only the smart ones bothered to familiarize themselves with the language or avail themselves of basic translation technologies.

It made a difference in the digging of a well to know where the water was.

But whether people wanted help or not, they kept coming and helping themselves. They swarmed over the continent where first contact had been made. The Gamon insisted that there was no other intelligent life on the

planet. Wherever the Colonials went, they would find Gamon if there was a village. Every Gamon on the planet could communicate with every other by telepathy.

There could be no better news for exhausted space travelers. It was a diplomat's dream! The deal Apollo had made was for a whole world. Wherever the Colonials ventured on Paradis, the agreement went with them. There would be no requirement for endless negotiations.

So every door was open. The Colonials went through them all with a sense of joy that they could only express through work. And how they worked!

The scientists were the happiest of all. Some applied themselves to extracting minerals from the sea, which was easier for a space based technology than those who conducted mining operations in the ground. There was a lot more to do than only search for tylium. They had to pursue everything needed to create decent housing and medical facilities and an infrastructure that could one day help repair and even build new starships.

To the Gamon, there was no end of human beings coming down to Paradis. Due to the deconstruction of several civilian ships, there were far too many people to return to space even before the population began to increase—an anticipated and inevitable consequence of settlement.

These problems for the future were of no concern for the Colonials, hungry to touch earth right now and smell the air and stand on solid ground. All they knew was that they had survived Cylons and the Chitain and starvation. They had given up all hope of staying alive even in the miserable, cramped quarters of interstellar travel. Now it was if the Lords of Kobol had whispered incantations from the dark past and manufactured Paradis expressly for those who needed it most.

No sooner was a dilapidated ship dismantled than it began to transform into a temporary shelter. The new denizens of Paradis hammered and dug and planted and bolted and sweated and prayed. They made lights to take away the night and threw up walls to blot out the day.

Those who listened to the Gamon when advice was offered, built better and slept better. It was good to be welcome in a new world, even by a primitive people.

There was more communication on large-scale enterprises than on small homesteads. Ryis proved his skill as an organizer. He worked with the civilian authorities. He worked with the warriors. He took all the advice from the Native population that was offered.

Ryis issued statements to the effect that temporary shelters would not be needed for long. He intended to give everyone a permanent home as soon as possible. His great dream grew brighter every day—New Caprica City.

Apollo didn't know why he felt uncomfortable in the company of Ryis. The head architect never gave cause for complaint. If anything, the man tended to take the side of the warriors over the Colonials whenever there was hesitation in the deconstruction of terminally crippled ships. The architect had a sense of mission and a devotion to efficiency that reminded Apollo of Adama. Here was a man who knew how to get things done.

One day when looking over construction plans in Ryis's field office, Apollo said, "You'll make our stay on the planet comfortable, for as long as we're here."

"A long time," Ryis said, as much to himself as to the commander.

Apollo sighed. "Yes, it could be some time. We have so much to do before we can leave."

"There is also the matter of supplies," said Ryis, dropping the conversational tone.

"Yes, we both have needs for the same basic materiel and fuel."

Ryis felt an increased sense of confidence. "Which brings up the issue of priorities. The Council is not going to let our people be exposed to the elements or go without basic supplies, not when it is within our means to clothe, feed and house them all."

"No one disagrees about that," said Apollo, getting the drift. "The debate is over how much you are building for permanence versus how much we need for the rebuilding of the fleet."

Ryis took a deep breath. The battle lines had been drawn, and it might be a good time to change the subject. "How are the studies on the sun coming?" he asked.

"They still don't know how late it is in its final stage. Would you like to attend the next briefing?"

Ryis scratched his cheek. "I'd be interested, Commander, but I have too much work right now. I'm kept informed by my friends on the Council regarding all important developments."

"It's good to have friends," agreed Apollo with a smile.

Apollo had told Ryis once before that he didn't need to use the formal address of Commander. The architect was a civilian. But there was something about the man's tone of voice suggesting a critical attitude when he addressed Apollo. It wasn't sarcastic, not exactly. There was something smug about his manner—as if Ryis might be keeping a secret from anyone dumb enough to give a damn and be a warrior.

"You're not a student of astronomy?" asked Apollo. He felt an uncharacteristic desire to goad the man.

"No, I leave science to scientists."

Apollo flipped through a few pages of computations on the architect's desk. "Yet you work with mathematics the same as an astronomer. Someone interested in the design of a building might also be expected to be interested in the structure of the cosmos."

Ryis smiled, but he didn't look up from his blueprints. "Such as the architecture of a sun?"

Apollo felt as if a duel had begun between the two men, but neither was quite sure what to use as a weapon. He continued his line of thought.

"You know it takes a long time for a star to reach the red giant phase—probably something in the order of ten billion years."

Ryis chose his moment. He put down his pencil and looked Apollo in the eye.

"Yes, Commander, that is a long time. Just think how many buildings I could put up in all that time and all the wars you could have declared if we'd been around that long."

Apollo frowned, as Ryis had intended. "I'm not interested in declaring wars. But I could defend a lot of *civilians* in all that time."

"So what else do we know about our red giant?" asked the architect.

"Paradis orbits it at a distance of some 145 million miles—perhaps just far enough for life to have developed in the sun's final stage."

"Perhaps?"

"If life is original to this planet. It could just as easily have been settled after the sun expanded to the size of a red giant. Either way, I feel the Lords of Kobol smiled on us the day we found this world; but we can't take it for granted."

"Just a place for us to take a rest, is that what you mean?" asked Ryis, and this time he didn't hide the irritation in his voice. "Well, let me give you a number. In no time at all we can have an annual population growth of seven percent. You do the math."

"You're talking about the population doubling in ten years."

"What do you expect? We are going to live on this planet, not just twiddle our thumbs. After all the dying and suffering in space, you can't expect human beings not to be natural when you put them back in a natural setting."

"The problem was the war. Then there were the deprivations."

"You think that was all?" Ryis demanded. "They're sick of living in outer space, Apollo."

The commander of the *Galactica* noticed what it took for Ryis to finally call him by his proper name. That seemed as good a place as any to end the encounter.

"Good luck on your designs," he said and left the room. Ryis watched the door close behind the leader before he let his breath out.

"Frack!" he exclaimed. He hadn't meant to reveal so much of his actual feelings. Apollo was good! The commander liked to know where people stood. Ryis would have to make sure that he was as careful in selecting foremen on the big construction projects as Apollo would be choosing future warriors.

As far as Ryis was concerned, the debate with Apollo was purely theoretical and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. The most space happy warrior would have to admit that they were all going to be on this new planet for a good, long time.

Chapter Five

Not only did the Galacticans have meetings; the Gamon did as well. Yarto was summoned to a dream hut. Ever since he had made contact with the first human, he held a special position at the councils. In a way, he was responsible for all that followed.

The huts were part of Paradis, but only from the outside. Inside, they existed in the in-between places. The air inside was made of blue vapors that did not come from any fires but were always present. Breathing the vapors opened the spirit eye of all Gamon.

Yarto joined the circle that was already formed around the elder. They had been waiting. The line passed down a ritual herb and he ate it. The taste was like a shock of vinegar.

He spoke the traditional words. "I join the circle to honor you who are older than all machines. I honor you who are as old as the sea and the land. We do not stay here longer than we must. We only dream here in Paradis."

The old one raised a withered hand and gestured that the formalities were at an end.

"We are all fragments of the primary consciousness," he said. "We know who our visitors are and how much they lack in understanding. We have exercised responsibility toward this world and toward ourselves."

He stopped speaking. The others waited for him to resume. Patience was the greatest virtue in a dream hut.

The elder, weary from staying afloat so long in the seas of time, resumed. "It is too soon to judge these beings," he said. "They are proud of their weapons but they show no strong inclination to use the projectiles or the exploding chemicals or the energy beams against us. We know better than they the dangers they carry with them."

"We know what to think of their technologies," thundered the second oldest present. "We know what to think of their spaceships! They carry cold, metal spaceships in their souls."

"You are restless," said the elder. "Open your spirit eye and go on a quest to the center. There you will see that these people are your brothers."

Murmurings of assent informed the second oldest that he had overstepped the bounds of propriety. He bowed his head, not from weariness but from the moment of shame he allowed himself to feel.

The elder raised his hand again and all present waited for his last word on the subject of this meeting.

"To use the old word, the hated word, we must admit that there are *technologies* beyond what are visitors understand. They think we are children. That is good because we see how they treat us when they think the choices of life and death are in their hands alone. But we will have to speak to their councils and do this soon. They must be reminded that they are guests. They have plans to build where they should not."

The ancient Gamon closed his eyes, indicating that the meeting was over. The others broke the circle and left the hut. The red sun was hanging low in the sky as Yarto felt a cool breeze against his face.

He thought of Apollo and Gar'Tokk. They were both good men. But the Noman would be best to intercede between the Gamon and the Colonials when the time came.

And the time was drawing near.

As Baltar faced his first class, he experienced the same feeling of dread from the night before when he'd had an especially bad dream about Lucifer. The myriad flashing lights left the cogitator's transparent head and started crawling up and down his arms as if they were so many lightning bugs. Then they started to sting. As he attempted to brush them off, his arms began to bleed. He'd awakened in a cold sweat, still brushing nightmare bugs from his body. He was not grateful to have to face a class of suspicious students well versed in the worst possible slanders and libels against him. Basically, they had been told the truth.

He saw a sea of young faces. What a perverse irony that he was teaching a class in ethics and history, more specifically about the abuse of power in government and how to maintain a moral compass under extreme stress and temptation. Apollo, Athena and Tigh must have been using a newly discovered psychedelic drug when they had hatched this job for him.

"Baltar, you are the expert in what *not* to do," Tigh had pontificated when Baltar's new position was made official. "As part of your redemption you can discuss strategies and tactics from all directions, the practical and the moral."

They were in space during that conversation. But his first class was being held on the planet, on the very day when huge celebrations were also scheduled.

It was a beautiful day, birds were singing—and Baltar felt sick to his stomach. He'd rather be back on the battlestar he had tried so many times to seize. Already he missed the drone of the great engines, the antiseptic air, the sturdy metal ceilings flowing into the gray expanse of wall and corridor. The claustrophobia so many felt had never touched him.

As the consummate politician, he'd always been able to tap into the angst of people. That didn't mean he had to feel the emotions himself. A young ensign with the improbable name of Greenbean had once told Baltar that he was a natural contrarian who would always take the opposite position from the majority. The funny thing was that the assertion wasn't really true. From an early age, Baltar realized that he was wired differently from other people.

Even now the essence of his difference was brought home to him. Isolated in his room aboard the Galactica, he did not feel alone. But here, in front of a room of thirty fellow beings he felt his loneliness like a knife to the heart. It was easier to ignore the fact that he was unloved when the only face he saw was his own reflection.

Right now the last face he wanted to see was the one appearing at the door. Boomer had an easy confidence that always got on Baltar's nerves. Even more than Starbuck, Boomer never seemed to take Baltar seriously.

Boomer was the last person he wanted sitting in on his first class.

"Mind if I audit your lecture?" he asked.

Baltar smiled grimly. "Wouldn't it be more expedient to hide recording devices so that you people could play it back later?"

"You people?" Boomer echoed with a smile.

"Warriors, of course. Naturally I assume you are keeping tabs on me."

Before Boomer's appearance, some of the students had been bored while most were giving an air of subtle defiance. Now all were united by the prospect of a good fight, if only verbal. Baltar reflected that this was one way of starting off a class with a bang.

"We assume that you are recording your own lectures," said Boomer amiably. "Knowing you, they will end up for sale one of these days!"

"Will he sell the answers to test questions?" a girl in the back row wanted to know. The class laughed and Boomer kept on with his infuriating smile.

Baltar joined in the laughter—which surprised the class and even removed the smile from Boomer's face. The natural tactician in Baltar took over. Maybe he wasn't thrilled with the idea of a pedagogical career but he was always smart enough to make the best of a bad situation. If he didn't seize control right now he might as well call it quits.

Baltar was not a quitter.

He nodded at the female student. "If I sell you the test answers, young lady, I guarantee you that they won't be the correct answers!"

Now the collective laughter was on his side. He looked at Boomer whose expression could no longer be read.

"Why, that's terrible," said the girl, mortified.

"Exactly," was his response. "If you are going to cheat your classmates, why should they have any sympathy if you're caught?"

"Welcome to a class in ethics," said Boomer.

"And strategy," Baltar added.

Boomer decided to retreat from the field but not without firing a final shot. "In the past, I was hijacked by this man. Maybe he'll communicate better with you students since he's not holding you here at the point of a blaster. All of you should pay close attention—but take what he says with a grain of salt. Oh, and by the way, professor, you *are* under supervision."

"Will you tell us about the time you hijacked Boomer?" asked a red-haired boy.

Still watching the swinging door marking Boomer's exit, Baltar almost enjoyed the situation. "If you're a good boy," he answered. "I wonder which of you 'students' will pull the plug on me if I go too far! I guess the only way to find out is to proceed."

"May I ask a question?" asked a short girl in the middle of the class, holding up her hand.

"As you are the first student to observe protocol, I'd be delighted to answer you. From now on the rest of you students should follow her example and raise your hands before speaking."

"Well," began the girl, a bit flustered now that she had everyone's attention. "The big celebrations are tonight and I was sort of wondering how early we might be excused."

"I'm on your side," he said to everyone's surprise. "We've been busy little drones getting this planet in shape, and although we've only gotten ourselves a tentative foothold, it is sufficient for some good parties. So how about this? I'll give a brief lecture and ask you one question to think about before we reconvene tomorrow. You won't have to write a paper. I just want you to think."

Naturally the students jumped at the deal, little realizing how hard he would be on them tomorrow when he made each and every one of them stand in front of their classmates and speak extemporaneously. He'd make certain that they would have preferred written homework before assigning plenty of that. In the future, the class would improve their negotiating skills.

He kept his promise. For an opening lecture in an advanced course, the speech was relatively short.

"My critics would have it that my criminal career began before the unfortunate miscalculation with the Cylons. You see, before that exercise in

failed diplomacy, I explored the vagaries of the black market when cornering the market in our all-important fuel, tylium. Which means that I learned a lot about economics.

"The problem with most warriors—and I am fully aware that some of you are already well on that path—is that they fail to understand the economic causes of armed conflict. Even when facing a foe as implacable as the Cylons, it is wise to remember the basic laws underlying the actions of all sentient beings. To ignore that, is to construct an ethical system in a vacuum. And the only thing you should construct in a vacuum is a spaceship!

"When peace was first proposed, I couldn't believe it was possible for either side so I sought to gain some advantage for those closest to me. We will discuss in later classes why I put myself forth as one of the most dedicated advocates of peace. It was a strategy that failed utterly. You've all heard the stories and could probably do papers on my crimes or treason, or whatever you prefer to call it.

"But my point is more general and applicable to many situations. After a thousand yahren of war, all of us had forgotten how to operate in a civilian or peacetime economy. Now we have the opportunity on this new planet to try and relearn something from our dim past.

"We had to build up a heavy debt-servicing system of loans to pay for the machineries of war. All of our space travel was part of war expenditure. Our advances in science and technology were driven by the same grim requirements of defense—which is always a euphemism for the power to attack. I do not say that humanity had any other choice when the Cylons were dedicated to our absolute destruction. Ignoring this last fact was the great crime of the Council that only Commander Adama had the foresight to oppose."

That last bit of patriotism brought the students out of the trance the lecture had put them in. They applauded. Baltar availed himself of the opportunity to drink a glass of water. He was starting to develop another of his killing headaches. Their severity seemed directly linked to his nightmares. He felt like his head was about to split wide open and cursed himself for not having brought medicine with him.

The only good thing was the water. He had to admit that the water of Paradis was better than the recycled fluid passing for fresh water on a spaceship.

He continued. "Here is the point I am trying to make. If peace had occurred, and we had remained on our home worlds, we would have been plunged into the greatest depression in the history of our species. I do not bring this up as a mitigating circumstance to excuse my actions. I freely admit that it was not a primary consideration at the time. But now that we face the possibility of creating a peacetime economy on this planet, we must do some hard thinking.

"What do we do with the warriors while we are here? Quite obviously they do not intend for us to stay indefinitely. But how much preparation can go into plans for leaving Paradis, as opposed to effort expended on staying? Right now it may seem that Paradis offers more than enough natural resources to support civilian needs and the warriors' secondary economy. But that's assuming a static population model. Remember that we lost a lot of people during the last grueling twenty-five yahren.

"Now the people have a chance to do what comes naturally. They can reproduce and produce. They can feed and need. As the population increases, how many will be civilians and how many warriors? And as the population increases, how will that affect plans for the space armada that Apollo, I'm sure, will insist on constructing?

"In days to come, there will be growing conflicts between those who wish to stay and those who wish to leave. The economy will have trouble sustaining both visions, no matter how rich this planet is in resources. And remember that a growing population is the most dynamic, fluid and unpredictable force in the universe."

The students were in a trance again, except for a handful. He assumed that one of those special students who wasn't bored was probably the spy who was keeping an eye on him. On the other hand, Baltar had such a devious mind that it occurred to him that the spy might be such a good actor that he or she was pretending to be one of the bored students.

He decided to speed up the short lecture. The pain in his head had transformed from a fire into a dull ache. He had to lie down somewhere.

"Now I'm going to shift the topic, only slightly, to ask you the question I want you to ponder while you are attending the celebration tonight. Tools greatly define human behavior. Give a man a hammer and he's more likely to build than bash in his neighbor's head. Give a man a fully armed Viper and he may use it for something other than sightseeing.

"So ask yourselves why in our long journey across the universe we haven't taken full advantage of the technologies and energies at our command. We have a space-drive that works, the same as the Cylons. So instead of leap-frogging from one planet to another, why haven't we used the raw materials of any old solar system to create a world for ourselves instead of involving ourselves with the petty squabbles of different planets. Why do we even consider the quest for Earth, assuming such a place even exists or ever did?

"Consider our tools and vast energies, apply a practical economic model, and the question becomes why not build a world with all the elbow

room we could ever need? If we can secure sufficient supplies of tylium from Paradis, we have a third choice between staying here and continuing the quest for Earth. The trouble is that the Council would never consider such a proposal. Is it ethical to ignore all the options when the choices are life and death?

"We could simply find ourselves an asteroid belt in one of the solar systems we're certain to stumble upon. That would make the job easier because the raw materials we'd need are just floating around and begging to be used. We could build a giant factory in space. Then we ask for the services of a good scientist like Dr. Salig, for example. I believe among his specialties is a working knowledge of magneto-hydrodynamics. He knows about magnetic fields and volatile gases. He's the cook to throw together interesting ingredients in a vacuum.

"We can build, boys and girls. We can extract the raw materials from a moon or even a planet if we can't find the handy-dandy asteroids. Every metal we want is available in unlimited quantities and then we build to any dimensions we desire.

"I'm describing an architectural plan that would never cross the mind of someone as unimaginative as our head architect, what's-his-name—"

"Ryis," volunteered the blonde girl who had wanted to purchase the test answers.

"Yes, thank you."

He took a deep breath and finished his glass of water, appreciating yet again the quality of the stuff. A gorgeous yellow insect flitted past the window that had been installed in the classroom. He thought to himself there was something to be said for planets if you were in the right mood.

A hand went up and he recognized the student: "Excuse me, sir, but what does this have to do with ethics?"

He let his impatience out of its cage. "Is it ethical for a superior mind to humble itself before ungrateful peons?"

No sooner were the words spoken than his paranoia asserted itself and he scanned the students, looking for the spy in his class planted there to make sure that Baltar didn't corrupt any minds. But if such a person were present, the teacher couldn't make out who it was.

"Allow me to rephrase that last remark. Abuses of government can come from decisions not made as well as made! In the course of the class, we will discuss the importance of values and how a human being chooses his core beliefs. But right now, let's consider my question for tomorrow. Why is the proposal I put forth not likely to be taken up by the Council?"

They stared at him, some of their mouths open but no words coming forth. One thing was certain. They wouldn't be bored in Baltar's class.

Chapter Six

There were advantages to high-tech not always appreciated by either its advocates or critics. A case in point was the entertainment a battlestar could generate. Ever since the unbelievable energies released by a tylium explosion had been controlled and tunneled into energy transducers, the stars had become the domain of humanity. Life was changed in many subtle ways. All sorts of things were taken for granted that could barely have been imagined beforehand.

For example, there was the fireworks display celebrating the arrival on Paradis. To the adults there was nothing special about what could be accomplished with concentrated plasma bursts combined with three dimensional holographic imagery, but they were in the mood to enjoy it as part of their long anticipated celebration. The Nomen made a point of never being impressed. The Gamon didn't even bother watching.

But for thirteen year old Koren, Apollo's newly adopted son, every second was a thrill and a wonder. He watched Apollo holding hands with Cassie. They felt some of what he did, but the display was not foremost in their thoughts. They had other things on their minds.

He was at that age when he understood adulthood as a new world opening; but he was also smart enough to realize that he lost something in the transition. He saw a light in other kids that didn't shine from adult eyes.

And yet there was still another kind of light. It existed between Apollo and Cassie. They kept whispering about something important. Koren didn't

have to be a rocket scientist to figure out what it meant when Cassie would take Apollo's hand and place it on her stomach.

There was just a little extra roundness that hadn't been there a month ago.

Then they would regard him with a special look. They'd both put their hands on his head as if he might be the most special thing in the world. Everything was just too perfect for words.

But perfection never lasted. A few whispers later they'd be arguing about something. He couldn't tell what it was about because they kept their voices down. He was just as happy not to hear the words. He didn't like it when adults argued. He preferred looking up at the sky and seeing a spectacle above and beyond any quarrel.

At the moment, the greatest lights of all paraded across the night sky for Koren. They challenged the stars in their magnificence. The brightest star was the *Galactica*, the ship that would never be dismantled and turned into homes or factory parts. It could only be destroyed in a mighty space battle or be crushed in a black hole or burn as a flaming comet in a planet's atmosphere. It was too important to die in pieces.

From its guts had been wrenched the energies and mechanisms of the light show and fireworks display. Not all human settlements had a ringside seat for this. It was a show for the greatest concentration of Colonials, where Ryis planned to build his shining city on a hill, New Caprica.

Blossoms of flame began the show. They were different colors and shapes and sizes; but they all suggested flowers opening up to drink in the night. Then they all collapsed into the center and became a glowing, white sphere.

Even the most jaded adults applauded the vision of a new moon in the sky, making up for Paradis only having one natural satellite. Then the make-believe moon grew and grew in size as it transformed into a giant face.

Koren looked at Apollo to see his reaction. He could tell that his adoptive father was surprised. Koren was glad. He didn't like the idea that his father micro-managed every aspect of their lives. Even Apollo deserved an unexpected treat now and then.

The giant face was of Commander Adama. He gazed down benignly on the Colonials who had survived to reach a promised land he had not lived to enter. But as the face faded from view was there a hint of concern around the corners of the mouth? Could Paradis suffice for someone who had promised them Earth?

The display wasn't over. Pillars of fire built a mansion in the sky to be transformed into a cage of incredible birds that, in their turn, became a squadron of Vipers. Again there was applause.

It went on like that for the next centon. Human imagination transformed the sky just as it was intended to remake the planet on which they left their footprints. Every now and then Koren remembered to close his mouth. He didn't want to blink, afraid to miss even a micron of the spectacle.

There were sounds, too. Explosions; a chorus of soft voices. And from somewhere there was the sound of horns and drums accompanying the figure of a warrior. Koren was old enough to appreciate the tensions existing between the military and civilians. So he was every bit as grateful as his father to see and hear civilians applauding the symbol of the fighter.

He'd decided to keep to himself the altercation with another boy a few days ago. The kid had made the mistake of badmouthing warriors around Koren. The boy still had a black eye to show for his indiscretion. They'd had their fight in private and Koren had come home without any wounds from the battle. He reasoned that there was no reason to worry his foster father. The other boy had made it clear he did not intend to confess who had beaten him in a fair fight, even if he was subjected to the severest tortures. They ended up by shaking hands and Koren pronouncing the other kid worthy of being a warrior. All in all, an excellent outcome.

Koren felt inspired by the pictures in the sky to keep up the good work for the cause. Most civilians were okay. They just didn't understand the absolute requirement of having defenders in a dangerous world. The problem was that they thought that all they had to do was hide from the Cylons. Even a thirteen-year-old was wise enough to see the flaw in that reasoning.

Suddenly the most spectacular display of fireworks demanded everyone's attention. Cassie made a sound Koren had never heard before, sort of a *Whoops* combined with a *wow*. Apollo grabbed onto Koren with the hand that wasn't holding Cassie's.

"That's real," he said simply. "It's called lightning."

Koren had never seen lightning, but he was even more impressed by the thunder. The bolt had struck so near that there was only a second between the jagged river of white fire in the sky and the bone-aching explosion of sound.

The lightning was the harbinger of a storm. The temperature dropped and a cool wind stroked their faces. Welcome to Paradis, a real planet with real weather! The water came down in torrents.

Koren loved it. Apollo and Cassie didn't exactly hate it but he could tell that they would have happily postponed this particular pleasure. At least Cassie was laughing.

"Come on!" shouted Apollo and they ran for cover. They had chosen to be in the best location to witness the festivities which placed them far from shelter, even makeshift huts and tents that had been thrown up, not to mention the nearest building—a large hall intended that night for dancing.

Their best choice was to head for Apollo's Viper. He led Cassie and Koren across ground fast turning to mud.

As they ran, the boy soaked up his new sensations as quickly as his shoes absorbed water. The grass and dirt had a richer scent when wet. Koren breathed the essence of Paradis. He liked it better than the ventilated, slightly stale air of a space ship. But the boy didn't want to admit these feelings to Apollo. He would never say or do anything that questioned his destiny as a spaceman and warrior.

The rain beat a steady rhythm on their heads and filled their eyes. They had split off from the others. The storm had taken everyone by surprise. Apollo made a silent note to himself that they must make a priority out of forecasting the weather. He would speak to Doctor Salik about it.

Over the din of the storm, Koren heard a human scream. Apollo and Cassie were ahead of him, just out of range of the scream that transformed itself into a call for help.

"Stop!" shouted Koren. "Father! Cassie! Someone's in trouble."

They joined the boy and followed him. Just beyond a stand of trees they found a teenage girl who had landed in a bog.

"She's in quicksand," said Cassie at the same time reminding herself that too many years in space could make one forget about the unpleasant

surprises planets could hold in store.

Koren had to make himself wait for orders from Apollo, even though they were unwelcome instructions. He had to hang back and wait. Sometimes it seemed that all he would ever do was wait for that special day when somehow through no action of his own he would be an adult. Maybe the secret wasn't in what you did but what others expected of you.

At least he was mature enough not to cause extra problems. A year earlier he would have impulsively plowed ahead into danger and given his father two people to rescue.

Koren blinked water out of his eyes and saw the firm resolve of Cassie, tall and beautiful in the rain. He was more than old enough to appreciate the vision. Cassie was like a higher being sent to help the girl in trouble. With her medical skills she had saved many lives.

Apollo was always trying to save everyone. "Don't struggle now," were exactly the words the girl needed to hear. He said it with absolute confidence as if to suggest that if she believed in him that was sufficient to save her life.

Her eyes betrayed a moment of panic as Apollo unholstered his blaster. He turned slowly so as not to lose his footing and took aim at the nearest tree. One short blast and a tree limb was severed with the precision of a surgeon. Cassie and Koren both picked it up and brought it to him. Koren didn't say a word but remained standing where he was, closer to the edge of the bog.

As Apollo crouched down, the girl started to sink again and couldn't help herself thrashing about. "Listen to me!" he shouted. "Don't move. The more you struggle the faster you sink."

She regained her composure and started at him. The quicksand was up to her chest. Koren prayed for her to get out before the quicksand was up to her chin. He was afraid that if he were in her situation, he would panic if that brown slop got too close to his mouth and nose.

Apollo continued speaking calmly. "You need to float. Act like you're in water. When you try to pull out you create a vacuum that sucks you under. I'm going to pass you this tree limb. But first catch your breath and try to spread out your limbs and float!"

The rain started to let up as Apollo passed the makeshift pole to the girl. As if copying her rescuer's slow and deliberate movements, she willed her arms to cover the short distance to the pole when it was in range.

"Take your time," said Apollo.

She did, inching her hands across the wet leaves and rough bark until she had a decent handhold. When she was ready she nodded her head ever so slightly.

For Apollo, her motion was as spectacular as all the fireworks display put together. As he started to pull her in, Cassie put her arms around his waste, more firmly anchoring him to the lip of the bog. Koren grabbed onto Cassie without anyone having to tell him what to do.

There was only one bad moment when the girl almost breathed in quicksand. She spat out the muck, and made everyone wait while she discovered that she could breathe again. Then she nodded again and Apollo finished pulling her out.

"Thank you, Commander," she gasped out.

She was about Koren's age, Cassie noticed as she said, "What's your name, young lady?"

"Caran."

"How did you get yourself in this predicament?"

The girl sighed. "I'm not sure. I was on my way to the big dance. I thought I'd get a head start before the sky show was over. I saw a funny little animal that hopped. It had long ears and I thought I'd follow it."

"You need to be careful where you step," advised Koren.

"No kidding! That's a brilliant observation," the girl shot back.

"Well, at least I haven't done anything that almost got me killed."

Caran shot Koren a dirty look. "Keep talking and we can change that!"

Cassie laughed and Apollo joined in. She whispered in his ear, "Love at first sight."

"Don't you two think you should introduce yourselves," she suggested.

"I'm Koren. Nice to meet you Caran."

She stood up and held out a mud encrusted hand and Koren took it. Then came one of those awkward silences that mean so much to adolescents but seem mere shyness to the older members of the tribe.

Cassie helped move things along. "Well, if you were headed for the dance, why don't you join us? We were going there, too."

"We were?" asked Apollo.

"Yes, we were. Would you like to dance with Koren?"

"Cassie!" Koren did not like the direction of the conversation one bit.

"I promised a dance to another boy, but only one," replied Caran.

"One boy or one dance?" asked Apollo with a grin, getting into the spirit of things.

"I don't know how to dance!" volunteered Koren, but at this point no one was actually listening to him.

"One boy, one dance," said Caran, wiping her hands on a cloth that Cassie fished out of somewhere. "But I certainly feel a debt of gratitude to all of you for having rescued me."

"Yeah," was all Koren could squeak out.

With a big grin, the girl grabbed Koren by the ears to everyone's surprise and said, "Let's all have fun."

For a moment he thought she was going to kiss him. Before he could decide if he liked the idea or not, she let go and was running ahead. They followed, laughing.

"Let's make sure she doesn't fall into any more quicksand," muttered Koren under his breath but Apollo heard and ruffled his boy's hair.

They all ran in what they hoped was the right direction.

The Nomen did not attend the dance. From his high vantage point atop a tall hill, Gar'Tokk observed the lights spread out below like a woman's fine jewelry. He and a few of his comrades had chosen to celebrate this night in a different way. They had not tried to avoid the sudden downpour but stood in it and turned their proud brows toward the clouds. The storm spent itself. The clouds vanished as swiftly as they had arrived and now the clear night returned. Gar'Tokk amused himself at the thought that the organizers of the light and fantasy show must have heaved a sigh of relief that they finished before Nature put on a performance that dwarfed anything technology could produce.

He regarded the dwelling he'd so recently constructed. Ryis would not have approved, which was fine with him. He and a handful of other Borellian Nomen had dismantled a small craft and made a Spartan habitat up in the hills so they would be that much closer to the night wind.

These were true friends of Gar'Tokk, some of the Nomen who had accepted him again despite his befriending Apollo. There were but few Nomen still with the fleet. They had no women, and therefore no hope for the future. It seemed pointless that they would condemn each other over events in the past; especially when their situation had altered so drastically.

Tonight they ate the meat of an animal Gar'Tokk had killed with the aid of H'Mal and Bu'Klin. These two were new additions to his circle of close intimates. They had come to know each other better on the planet because of the affinity they had for the hunt. Paradis spoke to them.

At the bottom of the hill, debris from gutted spaceships was jumbled together as if giant, black insects had cast off their carapaces before flying to freedom. Skeletal fingers of metal reached toward them like giant claws attempting to pull them down.

"There is trouble coming," said Gar'Tokk.

"When is it otherwise?" asked H'Mal.

"This will be different. This is not doing battle with an enemy that will kill you if you don't strike first. This is not the same as fighting Cylons."

"What is the trouble?" asked his other companion.

"New Caprica City," said Gar'Tokk simply. "The Colonials put down deeper roots than we do. They like to stay in one place and call it theirs for all time."

"They don't understand freedom," lamented H'Mal.

"Freedom is motion," added BukTin. "These Colonials stay in one place and call it freedom."

Gar'Tokk breathed deep the air of Paradis. He saw a shooting star, a white dot falling across the black canopy of the night. An omen, but of what

he wasn't sure.

"There are places; and then there are places," he said. "For us there is freedom in a whole planet that we can roam. We are not farmers."

H'Mal spit on the ground. "The wind is free. I would rather take lessons from it than a battlestar."

GarTokk nodded. "We can be free on a planet if we do not tie ourselves to one rock or one tree. But there is also freedom in space."

No one spoke for some time. They gnawed their meat. They drank grog they had brought with them. They listened to the wind.

Then GarTokk spoke again. "I do not believe we are meant to stay the time the Colonials intend."

A new voice was added to their company: "That is true. We must speak, GarTokk."

It was Yarto. None among the Nomen present asked how he had come upon them without their hearing his ascent up the escarpment. In truth, they were amazed. No one could sneak up on Nomen. At least not until they met the Gamon.

They accepted his presence without comment.

They appreciated that they were in his world.

Someone else who did not attend any of the dances was Ryis. He had taken the opportunity afforded by the celebrations to gather a small group together in private. He had chosen men with hard faces, carefully selected from mining operations, both land and sea, as well as certain building projects.

"We won't be bothered tonight," he said. "The secret of success is to work when others play. I want you to leave your current assignments and

work directly for me."

"That shouldn't be a problem," answered a bald man with big arms. "You're in charge of everything, aren't you?"

"Yes and no," said the architect. "The way it works is that I have complete autonomy until someone second guesses me. We have a democracy to contend with, and on top of that a military that is always willing to declare an emergency and overrule even reasonable decisions by the Council."

"Well, what else can you do in an emergency?" asked a bearded man.

"We won't get into that tonight," said Ryis, refilling his questioner's glass. "Planning for emergencies isn't the sole province of the military. We are in an unusual circumstance where the warriors are not doing a damned thing about preparing defenses on this planet."

"We don't have an enemy here," said the bald man.

"Not yet," commented Ryis grimly. "But I've learned to plan for every contingency. Gentlemen, I want you to help me build New Caprica City with defenses in mind. I don't care how much diplomacy gushes forth from Commander Apollo. This is one time when someone other than a warrior needs to plan for trouble."

No one disagreed. He had his team. Their first task would be to insure a steady supply of everything.

Chapter Seven

Cassiopeia couldn't stop crying. If she could only remember why she had started in the first place it would help; but she wasn't really certain of the reason. She had always criticized herself for being more prone to tears than her friends. The pregnancy certainly affected her mood swings. If Apollo had ever passed on to her what Baltar told him about the non-human father of her child, she would have had plenty of reasons for tears. But she continued to think of Apollo as the father.

Alone in the med-lab, the tears started flowing. She stopped working and poured herself a glass of water. Maybe if she could just sit down and catch her breath it would be all right.

Everything was going well with the new life on Paradis. As was true of so many other technically trained people, she spent a lot of time traveling between space and the world below. There was so much work to do in both places. What a pleasure just to think about work instead of war.

She dabbed at her eyes. Then it came to her. She felt foolish but had to admit why she was unhappy. One could only deal so long with a vista of suffocating , starving, and wounded people. Ultimately the soul became exhausted when one had to help so many.

She also had to be there for Dalton. Thought of her daughter helped staunch the tears. Cassie thought about Dalton's friends, her friends. Those wonderful young pilots: Trays and Troy, Boomer and Bojay. Then she thought again about Troy, the fine man Boxie had grown into.

Catching her reflection in the polished surface of a piece of lab equipment inspired a laugh; but the sound wasn't happy. She held her hand up to her mouth to stifle the laugh transforming into a sob.

The problem was Cassie herself. She hadn't thought about herself in a long time. As a Gemonese, there was nothing stronger than loyalty. What was she to do when she loved with all her heart but that love wasn't fully returned?

She had enjoyed attending the celebration with Apollo. She felt a deep contentment over how Koren was accepting his new father. She liked to think that Jinkrat was looking down from somewhere with pride in how well his son was turning out.

She bit her lower lip. It didn't help thinking too much about children. That was her problem. She could never forget Apollo's expression when he found out about her pregnancy. The man who took on a galaxy of responsibility and made it look effortless suddenly stopped dead in his tracks at Cassie's revelation. She had hoped for a different expression on the face of the man she loved.

Drying her eyes, she returned to her work but stared at the materials on the table with no sense of inspiration. There was no medicine for the ache deep inside her.

There was always the problem of Starbuck. She couldn't stop thinking about him either. And then there was Athena, who was concerned for Cassie—who didn't want to hurt her friend with her own relationship with Starbuck.

The one thing to be said for war was that it brought clarity. There was no confusion about what to do during a Cylon attack. The choices were

black and white. Today Cassie found herself sinking in a swamp as gray as the quicksand they'd discovered down on the planet.

Gritting her teeth, she went determinedly ahead with her work. Her hand shook when she mixed two chemicals and for a moment thought she was responsible for the acrid stench in the air.

One micron later she recognized the unique odor of a burning fumarello. Speak of the devil! Starbuck stood in the doorway.

"May I come in?" he asked with that infuriating confidence of his. Before she could say a word he entered and leaned against the wall as if he owned the place.

Although she had deep feelings for both Apollo and Starbuck, they were very different emotions. There was a pressure in her, a command to rise to the occasion when she was with Apollo. With her jaunty colonel, she was more relaxed, ready to laugh. But Starbuck could also make her angry in ways no other man could.

"Your eyes are red," he said.

"Oh, yes," she began, uncertainly. "I got something in my eye. Must be more careful."

The old Starbuck would have fallen for that or maybe not even cared. The new, improved Starbuck couldn't be put off that easily. They had both changed because of Dalton.

He walked over and held her as if he possessed her. She didn't want to back away. "You've been crying," he said.

That was the moment when Apollo would have asked what's wrong. Starbuck didn't say another word but kissed her with all the passion in him.

As she let herself feel everything, she was grateful that in some ways Starbuck would always be the same.

That wasn't all that didn't change. Her luck was as bad as ever. Because at that moment Apollo entered the med-lab!

Somehow she hoped she'd reached a stage in her life when she wouldn't be the cause of quarrels between the men she loved the way Dalton kept finding herself between Trays and Troy.

But in matters of the heart, men and women never stopped being children at some level. Starbuck broke off the kiss and stared at Apollo. If he'd been playing a hand of pyramid, he could bluff his way through the situation. If Apollo had just been meditating, he'd deal with the situation with more aplomb.

But Cassie could tell right away that this was not going to be a pleasant scene.

"You're lucky that I have a meeting with President Tigh," said Apollo, "or I'd give you another lesson about the lines you don't cross."

"Apollo," was all Starbuck managed to say.

"Cassie!" said Apollo, glaring at her. "I can't believe you'd be so casual about this after all we've been through. All of us!"

"Apollo," was all she managed to blurt out.

"Old friend," Starbuck managed to add to the discourse. "Don't make too much of this."

Apollo was too upset to stop. "You never make enough of anything! That's your problem."

Cassie regained her composure. "Stop it before you get started," she said. "Both of you. It wasn't that long ago I patched up Starbuck in this lab

because of a fight you had over Athena. I'm not in the mood to play nurse if the fight is over me!"

While they were both staring, she made a dramatic exit, even though she had to leave her own med-lab!

Cassie was on a lot of people's minds today. A few centons after the incident in the med-lab, Sheba was thinking about her. Ever since Cassiopeia had saved Sheba's life, the dedicated pilot understood better than ever that there are many ways to fight for what you believe in. She wished her father had better understood the virtues of those who aren't warriors.

On the other hand, there were virtues in Cain that weren't shared by enough people to satisfy Sheba. Her problem with Cassie was that the woman didn't have the steadfastness she liked in people. Maybe Sheba was too much her father's daughter, expecting a directness and honesty in all human affairs that was unnatural. Starbuck and Cassie made Sheba uncomfortable because they always acted on impulse. Sheba refused to be a slave to her own emotions. She had learned that from her father. But she also knew that one could go too far in either direction.

She had stood alone at her father's grave. An eight-legged crawlon had spun a silvery thread over the name CAIN. Impulsively, she'd reached out to wipe away the web but then changed her mind.

The planet accepted her father's remains and made a permanent home for him. She liked that, remembering the ceremony on which Tigh had insisted. She had never received such an outpouring of love before. Paradis became her home that day.

Walking with a firm stride, she returned to her Viper. The president was expecting her. Instead of seeing him in orbit, she was honored to visit his small, fairly private home on the new world. Soon Ryis would finish stately

offices for Tigh as well as sumptuous Council chambers, but the president had intimated to a select few that he wanted a place on Paradis that was his alone.

As Sheba flew to the coordinates that had been given her as if rare jewels, she passed another Viper leaving the President. Bojay waved and she waved back. Poor Tigh could never completely escape the demands of his office. Limiting access to his person was the only privacy a leader could expect. She wondered when he'd last given in to the need for sleep.

Sheba landed in front of the house and was met by a member of Tigh's security team. She expected to be led inside but her destination was the back yard. Coming around the corner was none other than Apollo. This was a day of surprises.

"I guess Tigh isn't enjoying much solitude today," she said.

"We're as busy as during a war," he said, "but this is certainly preferable."

She wasn't ready for the flood of emotions she felt in Apollo's presence, the very emotions she tried so hard to control. At times like this there was nothing better than the devotion to duty that she shared with her commander, independently of how they felt about each other.

If only the wonderful day would come when he recognized that he and she were the children of the greatest warriors ever to resist the Cylons! Deep down Sheba could never stop believing that Apollo was her destiny.

She was glad that he had to leave and that she was late to see Tigh. She wasn't ready for a long talk with him now. Duty called.

The security man gestured for her to follow. Tigh was the most relaxed she'd ever seen him. Maybe he'd caught up on a lifetime of sleep. Now he was gardening.

"I passed Apollo coming in," she volunteered.

"Yes," he said, mopping sweat from his brow and putting down a pair of pruning shears. "He was here to discuss the translation of the book. We've been able to decipher some of the ancient languages in the texts because of a most remarkable discovery. Our own language may have evolved from the language of the texts."

Without asking, he poured her a tall glass of pink water. As she sipped the liquid she realized it was a new drink that he had made from ingredients in his garden. It was sweet and refreshing.

"Paradis feels like home," she said.

"Yes, doesn't it?" he agreed, gesturing that she join him as he sat down in one of several chairs that were lined up to face the garden.

"I have the latest reports on the deconstruction of the crippled ships," she said.

"I know, I know," he said airily, waving his hand as if a recitation of facts and figures was of no immediate importance. "You and Starbuck and Boomer have been doing an excellent job overseeing all that. How do you like your drink?"

"I like it." She took another sip. In all the years she'd known Tigh she'd never seen him less concerned about the nuts and bolts of practical politics, the basic business of government. The man was taking his first vacation.

He took a long draw on his own drink. "When the Gamon gave us that book, they opened my eyes to many things," he said. "GarTokk has been invaluable in communicating with these natives, you know. Our language experts are having a field day. But there are symbols and geometric markings they can't make heads or tails of."

Sheba finished her drink. She hadn't realized how thirsty she was. "Maybe Dr. Lorrins could help with that," she suggested.

"Our top physicist?" he smiled at her. "Way ahead of you. He's already been consulted. But isn't it interesting that something so advanced is showing up on a primitive world?"

"Maybe it's not as primitive as we think," she said.

"That's why I asked you to report directly," he said. "I value your opinion. You have a better understanding of the big picture than many of your comrades. Your father gave you a grim lesson in how to balance military and civilian considerations."

"I remember the *Pegasus*," she said softly. Tigh nodded. They sat silently and regarded Tigh's garden.

Rows of crops were separated by white strings held in place by little wooden pegs. The strings were both vertical and horizontal, giving the garden the appearance of a radar grid aboard one of the battlestars. An orange pyramid shape pushed up from the ground in one place while a small green sphere appeared in the rectangle next to it. Some of the giant insects with rainbow-hued wings hovered over the crops. One growth in particular caught her eye.

"Hey, those look like heffala berries," she said, one of her favorite crops from Caprica.

"They're better," he boasted. "And over there is something tastier than our hydronic mushies."

"Did you grow what I've been drinking?" she asked.

"No, I picked small fruits off a tree over there," he said, pointing. "They were just waiting for us to arrive." He grinned.

The red sun shown down on Tigh's handiwork and it was good.

"This is beautiful," Sheba said at last.

"Thank you," he replied. "I can't stay here as much as I'd like but the last time I saw this garden at dawn I was afraid it was all a mirage and if I closed my eyes it would all disappear."

Sheba understood. "Like our time on this planet."

"The conflicts are already beginning," he said. "I was stupid enough to think that maybe our problems were over, at least for a little while. But that never happens. Apollo has jurisdiction over the fleet. Ryis has authority over mining operations and all the large-scale building projects."

"Apollo wants to push forward rebuilding the fleet," said Sheba.

"Correct. And Ryis is perfectly happy to continue dismantling it until there's nothing left but the *Galactica* and the *Daedalus*."

Sheba smiled. "Are you sure that our great architect is content to leave those battleships alone?"

Tigh finished his drink. "We can always hope we've seen the last of the Cylons."

"And the Chitain," she added, sadly remembering her father's miscalculations in that regard.

"We can also hope there won't be problems on this planet from the Gamon."

She was surprised to hear that from Tigh. "I thought everything was fine in that department."

"You could say that it's my job not to take *anything* for granted."

"Like the debates the scientists are having about how far into the last stage the red sun happens to be?"

He patted her on the arm. "You are your father's daughter, Sheba. You consider all the possibilities and worry about them. A good leader has to be paranoid."

"But not too paranoid," she added.

He nodded. "Exactly."

"Are you enjoying your rest?"

"I never knew how much I needed this. As long as you're here, I'd like to ask your opinion on something else."

"Anything but the reports," she teased him.

"You can leave those. What I want to know is what you think of our campaign to reform Baltar?"

She sighed. "That's a tough one."

"We are keeping a watch on him. He continues to wear the ankle tracker."

"But letting someone with his powers of persuasion teach a class!"

"We are not as irresponsible as we seem," he said. "We are keeping a close eye on everything involving Baltar."

"Well, that might satisfy everyone but Starbuck," she said.

Tigh raised an eyebrow. "Baltar can always rest easy that no one hates and distrusts him more than Starbuck. But I really believe we have made the right decision about him. He will make his students think. In fact, the first question he assigned them was really quite interesting."

"I haven't kept up on what he's doing," she admitted.

"He wants his students to think about why we don't just build an artificial space habitat and not bother with planets any more. With the QSE technology we could do it."

"And you know full well why we don't!" she countered.

"Of course. But I want to see what the students come up with."

"Fair enough."

They sat for a while longer, enjoying the sunlight and basically watching the plants grow.

"It's peaceful, isn't it?" he asked at last.

"Yes."

"I'm ready for those reports now."

It came down to one indisputable fact: Starbuck would rather face the full force of Cassie's anger than an extended dose of sarcasm from Athena. So he didn't put off dealing with Cassie the way he would with Athena. Apollo had caught them. So now it was Cassie's turn to give Starbuck a piece of her mind.

"Why did you kiss me?" she demanded.

They were in the perfect setting for a confrontation. Instead of the sterility of the med-lab, they stood on the same verdant hill where Sheba had lain Cain to rest. Somehow the vision of his headstone did more to fill their hearts than the spires of New Caprica City, rising in the distance.

"You loved him, didn't you?" he asked, gazing at Cain's grave.

For the moment, she allowed him to change the subject. "Yes, of course I did. Cain was a complex man. He combined forcefulness with compassion. There were extremes in his nature that you wouldn't understand. He could switch from harshness to loving concern so fast that it would make your head spin."

She touched the stone and imagined that she was caressing the great man's cool forehead. "He had many lovers besides me. Yet he treated me

with a respect I've rarely known, even though I was a socialator back then."

She looked at Starbuck with her large hazel eyes. "That's why I wanted us to meet here."

Starbuck placed his hand on top of her hand still resting on the stone. "You think some of him would rub off on me?" he asked.

"I don't know," she admitted, pulling away and stepping back from him. "You shouldn't have kissed me."

Many men would have let it slide but not Starbuck. "You kissed back," he shot at her.

"But it led to another fight with Apollo!" she almost cried.

"We didn't know he was there. He can't always be around every time we get together!"

"I'm not sure about that," she said, taking in her surroundings as if she expected the Commander to materialize from behind a tree.

"Relax," he suggested.

"I'm the biggest fool in the galaxy! I always get myself in trouble."

He tried to take her in his arms but he pushed her away. "No, Starbuck! We need to talk right now. Just talk! You never do enough of that. Sometimes I hate all of you with your strong silences."

"What do you mean?"

"Warriors," she hissed. "You are all a lot of trouble."

He took his own advice and relaxed. "I don't blame you for that, Cassie. No one becomes a warrior to win a popularity contest."

"You'll always win an unpopularity contest with some of the civilians."

He nodded. "What do you want us to do?"

"Starbuck," she said very slowly, "you have never been able to commit to a full relationship with me or anyone else. I doubt that you ever will. It's not in you. I need more. I need someone to love only me, especially now with this baby coming!"

"I understand."

"And I don't want you and Apollo fighting over me all the time."

He took her hand as a comrade. "Don't worry too much about that. I think Apollo and I are going to be busy with a lot of other stuff real soon."

He would soon prove to be a prophet.

Every day in every way the Colonials did more and more to reshape the planet in their own image. One of their number who felt that he should be more often consulted about future plans was a certain thirteen-year-old.

Koren decided that a proper warrior could do every bit as much on a planet as in space. Apollo had persuaded him of this. The girl they'd rescued from the quicksand made a good case as well. Now Boomer and Starbuck added their voices.

Koren didn't think about his real father very often. But he could imagine Jinkrat adding his bit of oregg to the discussion and agreeing with everyone else. Koren could be a warrior and a spacemen anywhere!

He was excited that Apollo asked him to join his foster father along with Starbuck and Boomer. They were in search of materials to complete the task of repairing the fleet. Koren noted that he was one of the four men entrusted with this important mission.

There seemed to be a little tension between Apollo and Starbuck at the beginning of the day, but whatever the problem they were soon into the mutual project. Koren liked cooperation.

They carried scanning devices to check the ground for minerals and made notes about abandoned materials from dismantled spaceships that had not been used for construction. Boomer complained that he was having some trouble with his equipment, something about the readings being inconsistent. Apollo and Starbuck agreed that maybe all their equipment could use an overhaul.

Around noon they stopped to have a meal on a hilltop.

They had a perfect view of how construction was proceeding with New Caprica. Koren enjoyed looking at the giant city taking shape until his companions started complaining about it. He almost blurted out that he thought the city was as wonderful as a battlestar but decided to keep his mouth shut and listen. How else could he learn to be a proper warrior?

Starbuck shook his head and complained about how Ryis always got his way. Boomer complained that the Council of Twelve hadn't even taken a vote. Apollo mainly listened, the same as Koren, but finally had his say.

"What concerns me is the Gamon. Look!"

A great number of the planet's inhabitants were forming a circle around the city. Apollo had never seen that many natives in one place before.

"Gosh," said Koren, finally contributing to the discussion.

"I think we better get down there," he said.

"Yeah," agreed Starbuck. "Wish we had our Vipers on this hike."

"We'll just have to launch ourselves," said Boomer.

"I won't hold you back!" promised Koren, who started running.

"Hold on, Koren," said Apollo reaching out and grabbing the boy. "A broken leg won't help."

They proceeded at a reasonable pace. The Gamon weren't going anywhere.

When they finally arrived, Apollo looked for any sign of his Gamon friend. Despite the usual jokes about not being able to tell the natives apart, Apollo never had any problems distinguishing individuals. Unfortunately, he did not recognize any Gamon in this crowd.

"Look!" shouted Koren. "It's Gar'Tokk."

The big Noman had taken down his hood and approached. He was stroking his beard, a mannerism Apollo had never seen before.

"Is this serious?" asked Apollo.

Gar'Tokk nodded. "Ryis never talked to Yarto or any other Gamon before expanding his building project. They say the construction has expanded to the point where it violates sacred ground. Especially the mountain!"

Koren wondered why adults didn't communicate better with each other. He remembered back to the conflict between Jinkrat and Apollo. The boy had hated warriors before he got to know them—and now he wanted nothing more than to be one.

He hoped this time would be different.

"I need to see Ryis," said Apollo.

There was no difficulty passing through the line. The Gamon were not doing anything but bearing silent witness. So far.

"Do you want us with you?" asked Starbuck.

"Not this time, old friend. You stay with the others. I need to see Ryis alone."

The construction elite were very cooperative with the commander. They couldn't hide their nervousness. There was none of the usual bureaucratic delay. Apollo appreciated how the presence of the natives must have finally gotten the attention of even an egomaniac like Ryis.

But no sooner did he enter the man's office than he had his doubts again.

"Glad you're here, Commander," said the architect getting up from behind his desk and extending his hand in greeting. "You've got to stop your bottleneck."

"What?" demanded Apollo.

"You are holding up our supplies. I'm falling behind schedule."

Apollo was seething. "We aren't receiving our quotas of building materials and tylium, which we need for our repairs and to rebuild the fleet."

Ryis shook his head and put on a patronizing smile. "Aren't you a bit confused? We have been ordered to direct what limited materials are available toward the building of the new city."

Was the man insane? Apollo thought he'd experienced every kind of human folly, but this was something new. "We'll talk about this later, Ryis. We have an emergency to deal with right now."

"Oh, you mean the natives?" asked the architect, voice dripping with sarcasm. "That's not my problem—it's yours."

"We'll see about that."

"There's nothing to argue about, Commander. These Gamon told us this is sacred ground. Well, in a way they're right. The energy readings are off the scale and the quality of tylium ore is beyond compare. I'm going to call

the mountain we're digging into Kobol Mound. So we shouldn't be arguing over how to divide up scarce resources when we're about to hit the mother lode!"

"I'll speak to the Council," said Apollo tersely.

"A waste of time," Ryis assured him. "They are on my side."

"We have an agreement with the Gamon," said Apollo.

"Childish natives! Now please excuse me, Apollo. I have work to do and so have you."

As Ryis turned away, Apollo said, "You can address me as Commander!"

Chapter Eight

Two men sat on a metal platform that had once been part of a small family spaceship and watched the ocean waves of Paradis. Pieces of the ship had been used to build a resources station on the coast. Now the station manager and his best engineer sat on their shiny platform and watched the red sun grow huge as it slid down to the horizon.

The station extracted drinking water from the salty ocean. It separated out useful minerals from the brine and collected them in tubes. It stored up energy from the restless energy of the tides. And finally, it sent out small robot probes to look for sources of tylium in the vast regions lying under the sea.

Regarding the all important fuel, the manager who was bald and short had a few words: "They've found a fabulous source in that mountain."

"Yeah, I know," said the engineer who was tall and had a head of bright yellow hair.

"Want a smoke?" asked his boss.

"Sure."

Two fumarells were produced, lit up and enjoyed. They didn't speak until their smokes were half finished. Then the manager pointed at a piece of equipment outlined in the last light of the day.

"You like the new magnalift?"

"Yeah. You installed it while I was away."

"State of the art. It's made of saligium. Thank the Lords of Kobol we didn't lose it."

"What do you mean?"

The bald man had small spectacles that caught the light of the setting sun as he turned his head toward his companion. For a micron the younger man thought he was seeing the oscillating red dot of a Cylon.

"We've kept it hushed up but we had a little sea monster problem here."

"You've got to be kidding? A monster?"

"Yeah. For the first time since we set up this little plant we needed the services of warriors."

"Did they show?"

The manager chuckled. "For all the good it did us. Have I ever told you how much I hate warriors?"

The other man inhaled the salt air and let it out again. He was the kind of guy who liked to avoid trouble. When a controversy started he always found it expedient to hold his tongue. There was no percentage in choosing the wrong side. The more people got all wound up the better it was to play it safe.

On the other hand, it wasn't a good idea to act disinterested in the opinions of one's superior. The boss was an important man with a direct line to Ryis. So there was no harm in playing up to him a little—especially when there were no warriors in the general vicinity.

"I guess we all have problems with them," he said. "It just goes with being civilians."

The manager deep a deep drag on his fumarello and let out the smoke in a thin stream between a gap in his teeth. "Those problems may finally

come to an end. You mark my words. We won't have to put up with those mucoid bastards forever. They think they'll get us back into space so they can boss us around again, but Ryis has other ideas."

The engineer concentrated on his own smoke for a while. He would enjoy the scenery and the cool breeze coming off the sea if he hadn't suddenly found himself embroiled in politics.

"You were going to tell me about a sea monster?" he reminded the boss.

"Yeah, it was the damndest thing I've ever seen. It was more like a spaceship than a living thing, a long snaking black tube where you couldn't tell the front from the back. That is, you couldn't tell until the tentacles came out! It picked one of the men right off the magnalift and ate him. We were plenty nervous."

"I'm glad I missed it."

The manager slapped the engineer on the back and guffawed. "You don't know the half of it. If it could come that close to gobble up one of us there was a serious danger it could damage the equipment! So I wasted no time calling for some Vipers. Well, that was my mistake."

"What do you mean?"

The boss threw the unsmoked portion of his fumarello into the ocean. The other man watched with a certain sense of melancholy to see the glowing ember disappear into the dark water. He hated waste.

"They sent us three helmheads."

"I've never heard that expression," the other admitted.

"You know, the pilots wear helms. Anyway, I keep records of everything that goes on when I'm in charge of a job. There were two women

and one man, all young punks. The only good use of young people is as socialators, as far as I'm concerned."

The engineer had always suspected that his boss was something of a bigot but had no idea that the man's hatred ran so deep. "So, who were they?" he asked, still interested in the story.

"The male was named Troy. One of the females was named Dalton. I didn't get the other's name because the others just kept calling her cadet. Anyway, I told all three what happened and they took statements from some of the other men. Then the one named Troy took his Viper and flew out a little ways over the sea, looking for signs or whatever. I was left on the shore and overheard the women. You'll never believe what they were arguing about."

"I wouldn't venture a guess."

"Which female warrior was going to bed the male! I kid you not. This is what they're talking about, not the dead member of our crew, not the new danger that's been discovered. I take back what I said about them being sociolators. Warriors don't rise to that level."

The engineer felt uncomfortable and couldn't keep his next words from slipping out. "Well, you were eavesdropping on a private conversation. I mean, it's not like they could do much until they found the monster, right?"

The manager wasn't annoyed at being challenged. "You'd think that, wouldn't you? But just wait, it gets better. I'll admit I was being pretty low myself, listening in. But when the one named Dalton finally got tired of telling the other bitch to keep her hands off Troy, you'll never believe what they argued about next! Instead of discussing the problem right in front of their noses, the sea monster, they got into some weird nostalgia trip about

how the new cadet flew a mission aboard the *Pegasus* when the ship was destroyed in the battle of Kobol."

The engineer whistled. "You got all that?"

"Well, I wrote it down."

"Why?"

The manager reached into a box by his side and produced a bottle of grog. He poured two stiff ones before continuing.

"You want to know why?" he echoed the other man. "Because things are going to be different from now on. We have no idea what information may be useful to Ryis when he's making his case before the Council. Today's gossip is tomorrow's weapon. The next war is going to be against the warriors!"

That was going too far, even for someone who tried to avoid controversy. "That's felgercarb! You make it sound like the warriors are as bad as the Cylons."

The little bald man was drinking more than his companion and had less body mass. He was getting drunk and couldn't seem to stop his expressions of treason. "On this planet, they may be the closest thing to Cylons we'll ever see. Ever wonder why that frackin war went on for so many eons? If the Cylons hadn't existed, I think the warriors would have invented them."

"You're drunk," the other observed.

The manager put his arm around the taller man. "Yeah, I'll shut up. You never know just who you can trust nowadays. But don't worry, I won't keep tabs on you. You're not a slaggin' warrior."

The sun had set and the artificial lights came on automatically. The engineer wanted to finish his drink and leave. But he was still curious.

"What happened about the monster?"

The other laughed. "Nothing! They said they'd report to the Council.

They weren't about to use all that precious firepower just 'cause one of us was slowly digesting in a monster's stomach or intestine or whatever it's got."

"Well, how could they target something they didn't find?" The manager seemed to sober up at that point. "Use your head. They could tear up the sea bottom around here. They could kill everything for miles. The result would either kill the giant whatsit or drive it away. But why should they bother when it's only our lives at stake?"

The other man swallowed hard. "You have a point. But I heard we made a deal with the Gamon that we would respect the local flora and fauna as much as possible."

"Oh, please don't make me throw up," blustered the manager. "Come to think of it, that's not a bad idea." He dropped his empty glass, went to the edge of the metal dock and began spewing into the sea.

When he finished, he sat down right at the edge, facing the engineer.

"Isn't that dangerous?" asked the more sober of the duo.

"What?"

"You're so near the edge."

"Just good planning. If my gorge becomes buoyant again, I'm right where I need to be. I'll turn my head and add my fluids to the great briny deep."

This evening wasn't going at all well. "So the sea monster is still out there?"

"The ocean is big, my friend, and the thing is out there. Do you know the last thing I heard the warriors arguing about when Troy had rejoined the ladies?"

"No, although I'd rather hear more about the monster."

"There's nothing more to say on that. Nobody cares. It's probably some big honking pet of the Gamon. Anyhow, the last thing I heard Troy, Dalton and the new female cadet discussing was not how to make this planet safer but rather they discussed at great and boring length who is the better Viper pilot!" The manager laughed and laughed, then he started to hiccup. The engineer got up to offer assistance but the little man waved him off. He held his breath until the hiccups subsided.

"I hate them," he said, finally regaining his composure. "I hate them more than the monster and more than the frackin' natives. I hate them more than the stupid bureaucrats who are always late with our supplies but expect us to get our work done on time whether we eat or starve!"

"I feel the same way sometimes," the engineer admitted, "but the problem may solve itself sooner than you think. I hear rumors, too. People talk. The warriors are having trouble maintaining discipline among the fleet. Recruiting is down. The majority of the older warriors who have survived the last three battles want to retire to civilian life. Some of them no longer see a need for a military career. It sounds like our crew of workers would do a better job of handling this sea monster if we only had the weapons ourselves."

"Once a warrior always a warrior," muttered the boss, head beginning to droop. "I don't trust 'em as workers, technicians or craftsmen. With a lot of training and discipline, they might make it as socialators, the girls I mean."

The engineer made a move to pull the intoxicated manager away from the precipice but again the boss waved him off. It wouldn't do any good to try and grab the drunk and be responsible for him falling into the sea. On the other hand, it wouldn't be right to leave a man in this condition.

The engineer always prided himself on being able to solve problems. He sat down on the dock and simply waited for the manager to fall asleep. If the man fell backward, he'd grab him in time. If the man fell forward, not a problem—he could be dragged to safety.

The moon came out and cast light on the waiting game. At first the engineer was glad for the illumination. But only at first.

The silvery moonlight made it very easy to see the long, black tentacle reaching up, almost tentatively before it wrapped around the manager's waist. The surprise on the bald man's face must have exactly mirrored the expression on the engineer's. What made the whole event so exquisitely terrible was that it occurred in total silence. The victim was too surprised to scream.

In the wink of an eye, the little man was pulled into the sea. Even the splash wasn't very loud. When the engineer began to scream, the sound of his voice in his own ears was the loudest thing in the universe. He caught himself and had the presence of mind to look over the lip of the abyss. Below, a great, dark shape ululated in the dim light of the evening. It was as if the ocean itself had risen up to devour the manager.

The engineer ran from the platform to the shore and kept running. He had one thought as company—he'd have to tell a warrior what had happened.

The trouble with most of the warriors' critics was that they forgot the subject of their ire was human. That was something the Cylons never

forgot.

Apollo felt very human as he walked out of Ryis's office. Despite the anger that cloaked him, he still exuded authority. One of the civilian workers dared approach him even though he could sense the barely contained rage.

One micron later Apollo was glad the man had dared to speak up. Apollo promised he'd look into the man's complaint and continued on his search for his comrades.

Gar'Tokk, Starbuck, Boomer and Koren were also looking for him so their reunion didn't take long.

"What happened?" Starbuck asked.

"Ryis is a fool," said Apollo. "But we have another problem. One of the architect's men tells me their instruments are all fouled up."

Boomer gave a low whistle. "Same as ours. What is going on?"

"I intend to find out," announced Apollo. "First I need to contact Athena aboard the *Daedelus*."

The mention of Athena's name caused Starbuck to sigh involuntarily. After the debacle in the med-lab Starbuck had had a run-in with Athena that he'd be just as happy if Apollo never found out about. It was bad enough that he had been chewed out by Cassie after Apollo was through with him. It had been on the bridge of the battlestar...

Seeing Athena in her command position was somehow reassuring. He didn't mind her being in command when she was in uniform and doing her job so splendidly. The problem was when she was in command over Starbuck's personal life.

Without even looking up from the console, she'd said through the side of her mouth, "I heard about you kissing Cassie."

He couldn't believe how completely he'd blown it. Did everybody know? Would Baltar lecture him next? If the Cylons ever found them again, would they berate him about the kiss?

He couldn't defend himself. He didn't even want to. But neither did he want the words that launched out of his mouth like some crazy suicide mission.

"I'm sick and tired of all this," he said.

"What?" She straightened up from her work and looked him straight in the eye.

He was glad that they were alone on the bridge. It made it easier for him to get a heavy lode off his chest. "You heard me. I'm not frackin' perfect. I've never wanted to be. You need to back off."

"Back off?" She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She almost felt that she should move away from him and hated herself for even that brief micron of weakness. "You've got a lot of nerve."

"And you're giving me a severe pain in the fundament!" he shot back. "You want to talk about nerves! You're a wonderful lover, Athena. But I can only take so much. You don't own me."

He had conquered most of the beautiful women in the fleet. In many ways Athena was his ultimate conquest. But her need to always be in control gave him pause. Maybe the price was too high.

He'd stalked off that day as she'd slammed her fist into the wall and collapsed into her command chair. There were some things in the universe that not even Athena could command.

Now Starbuck watched Apollo call Athena on his communicator. His instincts told him they were about to go into crisis mode. With the Gamon outside the city and the paranoid staff around Ryis, the only outcome had to be trouble. Personal problems all seemed so small at times like this. But it had been that way for so many yahren that the Galacticans had no choice. If they were to live and love, they couldn't defer things in hopes of an impossible security.

As Apollo contacted Athena, he also had a recent memory. It was one thing to confront Starbuck when he caught him in the act with Cassie in the med-lab. But the conversation he'd had with his sister shortly after her confrontation with his old friend was too private to drag up later and shove in Starbuck's face.

There had to be some way to reach Starbuck other than constant lectures or an occasional fist to the jaw. In the midst of all that was happening on Paradis there was still room for the most easily forgotten truth. It mattered how people treated each other.

The last time Apollo had spoken to Athena over the comline, the subject had been Starbuck right after he'd stalked off.

"I keep warning you about him, Athena," he said. "Starbuck is just not going to lay down for you. He's his own man and he plays by his own rules."

"That's why I'm attracted to him," she admitted. "And I'm tired of being alone."

"I know."

"I've always wanted to settle down with someone who's my equal; someone strong enough not to be threatened by who I am!"

He'd been through this sort of thing with his sister before but this time he hoped he could finally break through and make her see herself. "Athena, your idea of equality is someone who is willing to stand and walk just a little behind you. There is nothing more difficult than real equality in a relationship. You are intelligent and strong. You are beautiful. You have earned every molecule of your rank. But my darling sister, you can't give Starbuck the one thing he needs most."

"What's that?" she asked, her lips quivering.

"To be let alone when he needs to be alone."

The silence between them was as deep as any point in space. She finally let out her breath in a long sigh and told Apollo all the truth that was in her.

"I know. I admit everything. But what can I do? I'm attracted to men who challenge me but I refuse to give in to that kind of man."

"Athena, you still won't see it completely, will you? You simply don't trust men."

As he'd watched her face over the screen it was as if he was standing right next to her. He could almost hear the wheels turning in her head.

"I've never met a man who didn't let me down."

He let the other boot drop before she did it herself. "Athena, you know what I think? I think you may be in love for the first time in your life, and that man is Starbuck."

That was too much for her. She switched the topic back to the business at hand. They spent the rest of that discussion on the topic of how Ryis was commandeering as many construction crews and supplies as he could take away from the fleet and devote to New Caprica City.

He hadn't talked to her since then. And now as he called her up it was definitely a matter of business, still the same business. Their personal lives would again take a back seat for purposes of the greater good.

The comscreen came on. Athena saw that Starbuck was with Apollo. It didn't matter to any of them now.

"We have a problem," Apollo began. He filled her in and instructed that she send down special equipment.

"I see you have Gar'Tokk with you," she said.

"He's invaluable," Apollo agreed, resisting the impulse to pat the Noman on the shoulder. "We must do everything in our power to communicate with the Gamon."

"As opposed to Ryis," she said.

"You've got that right!" volunteered Boomer. "There's no point talking to someone who won't listen."

"You'll have the equipment," she concluded, "but I don't know what good it will do if the other instruments are dysfunctional."

Apollo had a ready answer. "We need to cross check with as many different kinds of measuring devices and with the widest band of settings. Before we can deal with the problems down here we need some solid facts. I'm tired of playing guessing games."

Chapter Nine

Personal problems were always more important to an individual than burning issues of the moment. For Baltar, the severity of his headaches and the ever more surreal dreams became more important with each passing day. Soon he would not care about anything that did not exactly impinge on the volcano erupting inside his cranium.

Every night he put off going to sleep a little longer. No matter how exhausted he became, the dreams were waiting for him. One time a glowing Cylon head grew electric spider legs and sliced off his head before devouring every tasty morsel. Another night the corpses of Caprica rose from dusty oblivion to pursue him to the edge of a cliff where his awaiting fate was a spindly creature intent on sucking out the marrow of his bones. There were other dreams so terrible that he could no longer remember the details.

Perversely, the only thing that gave spice and savor to his life was the class he'd been so reluctant at first to teach. Some of the students seemed to have developed a certain solicitude toward their eccentric professor.

The blonde girl who'd arrested the attention of the class with her suggestion of purchasing test answers was the first to observe the deep circles under Baltar's eyes and his pale expression.

He was no longer sarcastic with her. Instead, he appreciated the concern of the class, to his great surprise.

Even more remarkable was that five students produced adequate answers to his question about why the Galacticans didn't produce an

artificial space habitat of any desired size and be done with planet-hopping once and for all. There was no one correct answers to the thought exercise. But there were several plausible scenarios and a handful of his students had come up with them.

Mainly, the space habitat would be a more attractive target to the Cylons than humanity spread out on a planet with a presence in space for purposes of defense. And then, too, there was the religious impulse that drove so many to find the holy soil of the home world and fulfill the destiny promised by Adama.

If satisfaction in one's work were a sufficient tonic to drive away demons of the night, then Professor Baltar's students offered him the cure. Alas, happy waking moments did nothing to deaden the pain of the incessant headaches. And the nightmares persisted.

One evening he tried to get stinking drunk. In his sleeping mind he thought he'd beaten his personal demons because he didn't seem to be having a nightmare. At least it wasn't a bad dream about himself.

He had a surprise in store. He was dreaming a dark dream, all right, but it wasn't about himself. Instead, it was about Cassiopeia.

He'd been keeping up with her condition, of course. He'd never forget the expression on Apollo's face when Baltar first suggested the unique parentage of her child. Recently he'd learned that she was finally beginning to show, rather late in the pregnancy. She had that wonderful kind of body that other women would kill for.

The interesting news was that she had accepted the arcane services of a Gamon midwife. That was definitely not something Baltar would have expected.

Nor would he have expected that she would play the protagonist in one of his nightmares, and he the disinterested spectator. In a way there was a relief in someone else being victimized. Maybe he would have his first good night's sleep in a long, long time.

As he watched, she suddenly became very pregnant and a glowing fetus erupted from her belly. There was a spurt of blood and for a moment he thought that Cassie had died within his dream. But no sooner had the thought crossed his somnambulant mind than she was on her feet, hale and hearty, and chasing the glowing fetus across the surface of a barren moon.

And then Baltar became a participant in the dream. He wanted to cry out in protest that he wanted to be a voyeur, only a voyeur, and stay out of the action this time. But there was no sound in the dream.

Then came the worst part. He had to chase her. Cassie was running from Baltar as she chased her floating baby. There didn't seem to be any erotic element in his pursuit of this particular beautiful woman.

Finally, there was a sound—a pounding, beating, insistent rhythm. Was it the beating of his heart or hers? Was it the drum beat of their footsteps as they scurried across a vast wasteland? The answer was neither.

So he was in another nightmare, after all. With his last ounce of will power he swore that he would not look over his shoulder. Nothing but nothing could make him turn around. Because if but for one trivial micron he dared to look around, he would see the thing that was making the pounding noise.

The thing that was chasing Baltar chasing Cassie chasing her baby.

The thing that was so ponderous and overwhelming that it made a sound of thunder in an otherwise silent dream in the empty vacuum of a dead moon.

So terrible that nothing could silence it, not even the laws of physics.

He looked over his shoulder.

He saw everything.

It was the worst vision yet. The giant figure chasing them, reaching hundreds of feet into the black sky, was the human form of Count Iblis.

He wore an expression of ultimate cosmic hatred that could rip the fabric of time and space.

That night, Baltar woke up screaming. He also had a dangerously high fever. He could not go on like this. He would have to find some way to give up sleep. That was the only possible remedy to this shrieking, howling madness.

He stayed home from school that day.

Something scuttled in the dark. Boomer caught the shape in the light he carried and then flashed the beam somewhere else. As the creature was moving away from them, up a wall, he didn't care to observe it any longer. It seemed a bit too large to crawl on the wall of the tunnel—as far as Boomer was concerned.

"The universe is full of little surprises, isn't it?" asked Starbuck with a smile.

"How long did it take to dig this tunnel?" Koren asked Apollo.

His foster father shook his head. "No time at all. With our technology, a mining tunnel is child's play."

"I wish these instruments worked as well," said the mining foreman who volunteered to lead the small party of investigators.

"Take some additional readings on this mountain. Something must be blocking the signals and disrupting the equipment. We have to find the

cause."

While the men worried over their dials and needles and readouts, Koren marveled at the handiwork of the mining tunnel. It was so perfect. The walls were always the same distance apart, allowing them to walk four abreast if they chose. The roof of the tunnel was twelve feet above the floor.

Their echoing footsteps seemed to speak to him. Technology was wonderful. Power and science and knowledge were the true gods of the universe. What could ever be more powerful? Human reason could overcome any obstacle. His new father would solve the problems of the inconsistent readings.

"We're definitely going to find something," Apollo reassured them.

"That intuitive flash-from-the-blue thing again, huh?" Boomer volunteered.

"Yeah," Apollo nodded. "It bugs the frack out of me. I wish I could turn it off sometimes."

Starbuck was never comfortable when Apollo discussed his visions. He changed the subject.

"Nothing bugs anyone as badly as that bug got to Boomer!" he teased his friend.

Boomer was unfazed. "Hey, you saw that thing run up the wall! You're not going to tell me you liked it any better."

"Maybe we could make a pet out of it," suggested Koren. They all laughed.

"We had a lot of those things come in here when we first blasted the tunnel," said the foreman. "After we moved heavy equipment into the cave and started working, most of them left. Don't think they liked the noise."

"How much further to the cave?" Apollo wanted to know.

"We're almost there," said the foreman.

In another moment they reached the end of the line and the readings went crazy. "That's loud!" Koren stated the obvious as they heard the high frequency squeal.

"I wish I'd left you outside," said Apollo.

"I'm glad you didn't," said Koren.

The foreman wrinkled his brow in concentration over the readings. "We're picking up a very high frequency signal, which is almost undetectable. We thought it was just the planet's resonance, but it now appears to have some coherency to it."

"Check it out," ordered Apollo.

The foreman scratched his head and then outlined the options. "We can either block it or locate the cause and see if we can remove it."

Apollo made his position clear. "Don't do anything until you report back to me. You got that?"

The foreman shrugged then caught the expression of the commander. He nodded and said, "Yes, sir."

Apollo gestured for the others in his immediate group to follow and they continued their explorations.

Boomer sidled up and asked, "What are you picking up back there?"

Apollo frowned. "Something's very strange. I don't know what it is yet but I'm beginning to feel that this mountain is a lot more than a Gamon sacred site."

Underground was not the ideal place for warriors. If they could not navigate the spaceways, then the atmosphere of a planet was the next best

thing. They did not really belong on the ground or under it. To hang suspended in nothing was to be alive. Only then were they a world unto themselves, a Viper alone and proud in the firmament.

Dalton, Trays and Troy were on patrol. The new cadet joined them, the one whose name the boss in charge of the ocean installation had never managed to pick up. Her name was Rhaya.

The veterans always enjoyed instructing a newcomer to their ranks.

They played with the new flyers. Out of play comes the best fighters. Civilians who hated and mistrusted playfulness could never be heroes. They were as dead to that part of life as the Cylons' Imperious Leader. The only difference was that Imperious Leader understood that something was missing in himself and that enraged all the mental energy in his three-lobed brain.

Today was Dalton's day. She felt as if she might be one of the graceful birds in the lovely skies of Paradis. The skill required for atmospheric flight was significantly different from space flight. But proficiency in one provided a foundation to learn the other.

In the course of their exodus across the stars, the best Viper pilots acquired both skills. Quite naturally, cadets first learned to maneuver in space. There was such a greater need. But the exodus of humanity brought them in contact with many planets where the other skill was needed.

Now that a serious commitment had been made to Paradis, it was time to polish the skills of sky-flying. In space, the whole trick to winning a battle was in positioning your craft. Viper pilots became masters of acceleration and deceleration. Pursuit of an enemy craft required a grasp of mathematics equal to the grip on the turbo stick. Patience was also key.

Atmospheric flight required a different set of instincts. Everything happened faster. You had to bank and glide. You had to allow for gusts of wind. There was more to do.

As Dalton and the other three pilots danced through the clouds and over the valleys of Paradis, she kept up a steady chatter for the others. "Watch out for updrafts!" she said more than once.

There are no updrafts in space. Viper pilots can forget about those if they don't rack up enough hours flying in an atmosphere.

As they chased each other, the new cadet proved herself equal to her bravado. The new ones always boasted and were willing to take a dare. It was part and parcel of the ritual.

Only after she'd seen Rhaya's ability demonstrated repeatedly did Dalton decide to challenge the new girl. Nothing wrong with demonstrating who was the better pilot!

"Maybe that's not such a good idea," said Troy.

"Is that a command?" Dalton wanted to know as she went into a dead-stick glide.

Before Troy could issue an actual command, the new cadet dropped like a rock in pursuit of Dalton. Troy silently cursed, ticked off at the idea he was probably the cause of this extra competitiveness between the two women. He made a mental note to ask Dr. Wilker why testosterone was supposed to cause more competitive behavior than estrogen. Both hormones seemed as volatile as rocket fuel!

In a situation like this, the veteran who had seen more action always had an advantage over the other, no matter how many enemy kills the other had racked up. Dalton flashed back to one of her most dangerous battles

against the Cylons when she had been so outnumbered that death seemed a certainty.

Starbuck always said that when you couldn't possibly get out of a situation you were free to act! The risks Dalton took that day were now hardwired into her. She didn't consciously decide to go into a death dive but there was something about Rhaya that made her throw caution to the wind.

She forgot that she was in an atmosphere.

Her Viper stalled.

It began to break up.

She couldn't believe that she was about to lose a valuable craft because she'd been headstrong, again! There was no choice but to activate the escape pod.

From her angle of descent, she couldn't see what was happening to the other pilot. But she had a ringside seat to the spectacle of a Viper slamming into a mountain and blowing itself to smithereens.

Even louder than the explosion was the scream coming from Troy and echoing inside her helm.

She reached the ground intact, jumped out of her pod, yanked off her helm and looked up at the other descending craft. That's when she became really scared.

The other Vipers began to wobble in the air. There was no problem of reckless flying. They were all losing power at the same time.

She held her breath as Troy issued instructions. The others fought to stabilize their crafts so they could land. It was a struggle to have the ships at the correct angle so that if the power died completely they wouldn't crack up.

The humming of the faltering engines stopped at the same time. Fortunately, the Vipers were close enough to the ground that they all made it.

And Dalton was glad to see that Rhaya hadn't exactly copied her crazy maneuver. At least they'd been spared a casualty.

Troy strode toward her, his face a mask of anger. But as he saw her close up his expression melted into one of sympathy.

"Dalton, you're hurt," he said simply.

"I'm fine," she said, "except for a runny nose."

"It's blood, Dalton," he corrected her. "I think you have serious head injuries."

The funny thing was that she didn't feel any pain. But being told that she was hurt seemed to do something to her legs. Suddenly she had to sit down.

"Take it easy," Troy told her. "We've got to figure out what happened to our other Vipers. We weren't doing stunt flying."

She accepted the put-down from Troy. It was only fair. But she wasn't ready for what Rhaya dumped on her.

"I'm sorry," the girl began well enough.

"Don't worry about me," said Dalton. "I'm just pissed that I screwed things up."

Rhaya could have kept her mouth shut and walked away. But she didn't. "Well, you should have thought about that before you demonstrated what an irresponsible pilot you are!"

Dalton clenched her teeth, which wasn't such a good idea. One of the teeth had split and the pain felt like a hot spike driven into her head. Dalton

was angry enough with herself without having to listen to this felgercarb.

With all the willpower in her, Dalton didn't strike back but tried for a touch of diplomacy. "I was wrong," she said. "I apologize."

Troy had wandered back to check on Dalton and couldn't help hearing the tail end of the exchange. He couldn't believe what Rhaya said next to Dalton.

"You shouldn't play a game that you don't have the skill to win."

Dalton couldn't believe what she was hearing. She opened her mouth but the words refused to come out.

Troy spoke for her. "That's enough, Rhaya! You're not helping."

The younger woman stalked off, which was fine with Dalton, who was still in a state of mental and physical shock.

"We've got to find out what went wrong with our Vipers," said Troy. "We also have to find provisions and somewhere to stay for the night. With our power out, we have no way of contacting base."

"How far do you think we are from base?" Dalton asked.

"We could be on the opposite side of the planet," Trays volunteered. He'd dug up a first aid kit and came over to bandage Dalton's head.

"Great," she said, followed by an "Ouch!" as Trays applied the pre-treated antiseptic bandage.

"We'll leave beacons at reasonable intervals," said Troy. "When I was following you down I saw what looked like a cave over that hill." He pointed. "If I'm right, at least the night won't be too bad."

As the three made plans, Rhaya sulked by a tree. She noticed what might be edible mushrooms near the tree roots. As she picked them, she

reflected on the sweet reasonableness of having Dalton try out all the foodstuffs first.

After a dose of pain-killer, Dalton was able to walk. Tray wouldn't let her scour the ground for supplies. When she tried, she experienced dizziness and nausea. After that she simply worked on being able to walk with the rest of them to reach the cave.

It started to rain, a slight sprinkle at first. But before they traversed a full metron, the rain became a downpour. Native cuisine was no longer the priority. Shelter beckoned. If any animals of Paradis were in the cave and acted territorial, they wouldn't stand a chance against blasters. Whatever had knocked out their Vipers didn't affect the weapons. Their flashlights worked as well, so they wouldn't have to start making fires yet.

Thanks to Troy's foresight, the warriors had brought a few provisions, enough for a meal for everyone. Trays volunteered to check out the cave. It was empty and relatively dry.

They went inside and made themselves at home. No sooner did Dalton sit down than another bout of dizziness hit.

"Excuse me everyone, but I think I need to take a nap."

Troy gave her part of his kit to use as a makeshift pillow. As Dalton put her head down, she saw a glint of metal on the floor of the cave.

She picked up the object and passed it to Troy. The other two gathered around.

"It's metal," said Trays.

"Yes, and we didn't bring it here," said Troy, stating the obvious.

"Where did it come from?" asked Rhaya.

"I wonder if there's any more," said Dalton.

They looked around and found a whole lot more. The floor of the cave was strewn with small, thin shards of the mysterious substance.

"This could be an important find," said Troy.

"And that's not all," said Trays, who had followed a trail of the stuff deep into the back of the cave. "This cave doesn't end. It goes on, deep into the mountain. And look at this!"

They joined him as he swept his light before them. The cave floor sloped downward. He picked up a pebble and rolled it down the incline. The small stone rolled out of sight and disappeared in the distance.

"I wonder what we've discovered," wondered Dalton.

"Maybe we'll find out what knocked out the engines of our Vipers," added Rhaya.

"There's more to Paradis than we thought," Troy said, finishing the thought for all of them. He held one of the metal shards between thumb and forefinger.

Chapter Ten

Sheba insisted on looking for the missing pilots personally. She needed to find them. She'd seen herself every time she'd looked into their young faces. In a way that she could never explain, she also saw her father in every brave warrior who took a chance.

As she launched her Viper into the clouds of Paradis, she thought about Cain. How civilians had hated him. He was a swaggering martinet to them. Some thought he was an idiot. They hated him because he had a simple view of good and evil. They despised him for his lack of diplomatic savvy.

He had made mistakes—but in the end, Cain had been willing to pay for his mistakes, even if it meant his life.

Find a civilian with that kind of dedication! Good luck!

The odds were that someone in the quartet of Dalton, Troy, Trays and Rhaya had made a mistake. If only one had fouled up, the others would follow their comrade into the fieriest pit of hell, burning hotter than the red giant in the sky of Paradis. Viper pilots were the essence of esprit de corps, the bone and sinew of camaraderie.

If they were alive, Sheba would find them.

She flew toward their last known position, descending below the clouds sooner than required because she wanted to drink in the sight of the planet, which unfurled below her a brown and green canvas. Whatever had happened to them, they were no longer in the sky. Something had clipped their wings and they would be on the ground, or in the sea.

As Sheba searched, she remembered the report the quartet had filed about a sea monster. So many problems were piling up for the warriors that the monster had been placed on low priority. That was probably a mistake. The first complaint had reported the loss of a worker. Now a follow-up report indicated the foreman of the project had also died.

Ryis would use that against the warriors when he made his next full report to the council. The warriors were expected to solve every problem before it happened. Then the lack of casualties would be used as an argument that the warriors were superfluous. On the other hand, when there were casualties proving that Paradis had its fair share of dangers, the deaths were held up as proof that the warriors weren't doing their job.

There was no way to win against that kind of logic.

Fortunately, warriors didn't have to construct legal briefs justifying their existence. They had an easier task. They only had to fight, and die, if need be.

Sheba reached the coordinates. She went lower and began circling. The last transmission from the cadets was not in vain. She saw the abandoned Vipers before the beacons. The cadets would follow standard procedure and leave beacons to mark their route.

As Sheba descended, she noticed that only three Vipers were in view. While she was wondering what happened to the fourth she turned on the comlink to make contact. That's when the power went out in her Viper.

Sheba was flying a dead hunk of metal at a much higher altitude than her comrades had. Whatever knocked out the other craft was reaching its invisible fingers higher now.

But Sheba was proficient at flying in atmosphere. She'd been at cruising speed when her Viper died.

She had no choice but to glide, and Vipers didn't glide very well. The terrain was terrible; there was no way to avoid crack-up. The question was how much control could she exert over a methodically planned crash?

She had to slow her descent. Without power how could she possibly survive? Her only hope was the trees. She could use their branches to slow her speed. Steering between two large trees was no easy task without power, but she performed the miracle. What passed for wings on a Viper absorbed the impact.

The ground rushed up at an alarming rate. Somehow she didn't break her neck. Stunned, she stumbled out of the craft. It hardly appeared to be damaged. She wished she could say the same for herself. Finding the others could wait for a little while. She laid flat on the ground and stared up at the azure skies of Paradis.

Cassie never thought being a mother would be such an adventure. When she decided to let a Gamon midwife help her through the final stages, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

She, along with many of the Colonials, had been wondering if there were any native women. Her midwife was the first she'd ever seen. Gar'Tokk had stopped by on the day she had arrived. He played a crucial role in communications between the Colonials and inhabitants of the planet. Cassie was aware that the Nomen had not seen one of their women in a very long time and assumed it must be an unusual experience for the burly Borellian to see the native female.

Her name was K'Ris. She had taken the trouble to learn some of the human language. Gar'Tokk told Cassie how unusual that was. He communicated in part through telepathy and in part from the similarity between the language of Paradis and the language of the Nomen.

Basically, Cassie was honored to have this woman come into the completed portion of New Caprica City and attend her in the spacious apartment that had been prepared for her. Even Ryis made a point of sending the expectant mother an arrangement of lavender flowers.

The midwife told Cassie a story the first night she was in attendance:

"Your child is special, like a piece of the sun. There are many suns, and one of them is the true father of your child."

Cassie continued to be protected from Baltar's theories of the real father. Apollo wanted it that way. If Baltar could overhear the midwife's story, he would have been astonished at how the metaphors supported his version. But Baltar was not allowed anywhere near the birth chamber.

"A piece of the sun is in you," said the midwife, tracing invisible geometric patterns over Cassie's swelling belly. "Only special people are born from light. Paradis is a special place. You did not come here by accident. But there is dark light as well as bright light."

While Cassie tried to divine her meaning, the old woman began to sing. Naturally the expectant mother did not understand the words. But a strange thing happened—unusual even for someone with the varied experiences of a Colonial.

The moment K'Ris began her strange chanting, a bird flew to the open window of Cassie's compartment. It began to chirp along with the Gamon. A second bird joined the first, and then another. They were all of different species, yet they sang together.

Cassie didn't tell anyone about the birds. When it was over, she thought she might have been hallucinating. But when Dr. Wilker dropped in to see how she was doing, she did tell him about the fairy tale of the midwife.

"It's interesting that even the natives sense that there is something special about their red sun. Our physicists are fascinated by it. Of course, there is a practical side. We must know how much time it will continue to give life to Paradis."

She rubbed her tummy. "Lately, I think a lot about giving life."

"Of course," he agreed, gazing out the window at the orb under discussion.

She remembered the unusual symbols the midwife had traced on her abdomen. "It's hard to believe that a star can die."

Wilker nodded. "That's when it throws out a stream of pure neutrinos. Even with the QSE technology, I don't think we'd be able to harness all that free energy. A shame, really."

As he was about to exit, he turned and asked, "Where is your midwife?"

"She's out gathering herbs."

"So near to when you are about to have the baby?"

Cassie smiled. "She says she knows about such things. The baby wouldn't dare come until she's here for me."

Cassie wasn't smiling the day after the birth. The midwife stole the child! Cassie broke down completely. All she could think to do was call for Apollo.

He was already on his way to her, having heard the news. He felt guilty about not having been present for the birth in the first place. But Cassie knew as well as he did that his job had become impossible again, as if they were all back in another war with the Cylons.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept; but that was no excuse for how he felt at this moment. Cassie needed him and he hadn't been there

for her,

For one moment, he would let himself stop thinking about the conflict between the Fleet and Ryis, not to mention the escalating problems with the Gamon. For one blissful moment of his life he would put out of his mind the failures of their equipment and the growing suspicion that more was going on with Paradis than any of them had imagined.

He just wanted to think about Cassie.

"We have warriors and part of the civilian security staff looking for your child," he said, holding her hand so hard he almost hurt her. "The midwife won't get away."

Tears streamed from Cassie's hazel eyes. "Why would that Gamon woman do this to me? She'd seemed so nice! What did I do to deserve this?"

"I'm certain that this is not about you, at least not personally. Things are starting to come apart here. Gar'Tokk warned me that Ryis made a mistake when he violated native taboos."

She laughed a bit hysterically. Apollo held her tight.

"Ryis sent me flowers," Cassie told him. "The proud architect wants to make a good impression. I'm one of the first mothers in New Caprica City!"

She pointed at the yellow wallpaper. "He even picked that out. He thought it was maternal. He just made one miscalculation by pissing on their sacred burial grounds!"

Apollo shook his head. "We don't know why she took your baby. Don't jump to conclusions."

Right on cue, his comlink activated. "Commander, we've found them, the Gamon woman and the child."

Cassie fainted. Apollo was stunned. He'd actually never seen a woman faint before. It was not typical for a Colonial.

When Cassie came to, she was at the hospital—with her baby. Apollo had arranged everything. Koren was there, too, grinning at the baby. She'd never realized that Koren had so many teeth.

She held the infant in her arms and cried over its already wet and shining face. "What happened to K'Ris?" she asked.

"We've put her under arrest," said Apollo.

"Did she say why she did it?"

He shook his head. Despite his relief, he was ill at ease. He didn't know why he felt this way. He started edging toward the door when Cassie called his bluff, as surely as if they were in a game of Pyramid and she held all the cards.

"Don't you want to hold our baby?" she asked.

The truth was that Apollo didn't. He wished he could stop thinking about what Baltar had said. Cassie's offer had frozen him in space, as if he might be a statue. He couldn't leave and couldn't reach out for the child.

He was saved by Koren. "Mind if I hold him?"

As Cassie passed the child to the boy, she reminded Apollo of yet another salient fact. "We still haven't given him a name."

"I know."

"Do you have any ideas on the subject?"

This was a day of miraculous saves for Commander Apollo. An orderly chose that moment to enter the room with the news that Gar'Tokk was waiting for him outside the door. He and the Noman had been requested by the midwife. Maybe she was ready to talk.

Cassie could sense the relief with which Apollo rushed off to do his duty. His wonderful, blessed duty! Although she was offended, she hid it well.

Gar'Tokk had nothing to say. He was like that sometimes. Apollo thanked the Lords of Kobol for the gift of silence. There would be plenty of words as they tried to solve this latest problem on a world called Paradis.

They entered the makeshift prison and confronted the old Gamon midwife. Although she had mastered some of the Colonial language for her dealings with Cassie, she now spoke only in her native tongue. Perhaps the complexities of what she had to say required that linguistic choice.

Then again, this might be her way of taking a stand against the Colonials.

"I will find out why she took the child," promised Gar'Tokk.

If nothing else, Apollo had learned the gift of patience from his Noman friend. He waited as the two muttered back and forth in a language encapsulating secrets and private wisdom.

Finally, Gar'Tokk had the answer. "She took the baby to perform a special cleansing and healing ritual. She says that she recognized an evil presence within the child, and felt compelled to perform a tribal exorcism upon it."

Apollo sighed. "I hadn't imagined it was anything like that."

Gar'Tokk didn't make it any easier on his old friend. "What would you say if I told you that I had the same feeling?"

Apollo summoned the prison guard. "You may release this woman," he said.

"I'm sorry, Commander," said the guard, "but I can't do that."

GarTokk became rigid in a fighting pose that Apollo recognized. He gestured for the Noman to stand down.

"Why can't you carry out my order?" Apollo asked.

"This native is being held under civilian authority," the man answered glumly. At least he wasn't smug about it.

"I see."

The guard felt that he had to explain. "The Council will determine her fate."

"And more besides," Apollo added, weary of going down a bitter path he'd traversed before.

"Let's go," he said to GarTokk. They weren't going to start a revolution from this prison cell.

The reality that he was no longer in command of civilian Colonials began to sink in. Apollo had dreaded this day. But this was no time for despair.

It was time to formulate a plan. He got on the comlink and called up Starbuck and Boomer. He'd level with them. This was not a battle he could fight alone.

And as long as he was choosing the right people to receive the unvarnished truth, he'd also have to let Cassie in on what he'd been told about the baby. No good would come of further dissembling. If he'd learned one thing from that old reprobate Baltar, it was that withholding information could be as damaging as conscious lying. There came a time when you had to take a stand with your friends.

That meant his friends had to be let in on what he knew.

Starbuck, Boomer and Apollo had a brief meeting and then headed on foot for the nearest construction site, just beyond the perimeter of the most recently finished portion of the city. Starbuck was the most current with his information.

"The Gamon have been doing silent protests at certain construction sites. Ryis is stirring up his men and arming construction workers at those exact sites."

"Just great," said Boomer. "This Ryis creep is turning into as big a problem as Baltar was in the bad old days."

"We've got to stop that first shot being fired," said Apollo.

"What is Tigh doing?" Starbuck asked.

"He's been trying to remain above the fray," answered Apollo, grimly. "I don't blame him but we're past the point of no return. He's going to have take a stand."

Even as they rushed past signs warning of deep holes and falling debris, they heard the sound of failure. They were too late. A hazard had been unleashed that no hard hat could protect against.

A dozen Gamon fell to the ground, smoking craters where their chests used to be.

The war was on. A new war. Not with Cylons. Not with the Chitain. This time there were no demonic monsters who'd declared a campaign of extermination against humanity.

This time the Colonials were starting it. And the targets were humanoids who had extended their hands in friendship on a safe and welcoming world.

Chapter Eleven

President Tigh had learned one hard lesson in his tenure as a reluctant leader. The art of politics is not only about compromise. Timing is every bit as important as the substance of an agreement. Puttering around in his garden, he waited for the storm to come that would blot out the beautiful light of the red sun. This would not be a storm of cloud and rain and wind.

The storm came in blood and fire. As he received the news of the massacre of the Gamon protestors, his heart sank. The moment had come for damage control. The president stood between the warriors and the civilians. He also spoke for the entire Colonial people in their dealing with the native population.

His job was to fix the problem.

He had a headache worthy of Baltar as he entered the cavernous boardroom in New Caprica City where all interested parties were meeting—with the exception of a representative of the Gamon, now that the precipitous actions of the construction workers had created a new enemy.

Tigh thought that somewhere Count Iblis was laughing his evil head off!

If access to power was the primary way in which to get what you want, then Ryis was outdoing himself with communications to Tigh. Whether in space or on Paradis, the head architect could always get a message through to Tigh. Endless requests for supplies, endless complaints about obstructionism from the warriors, a stream of vivid descriptions about every

delay all added up to one thing: *trouble*. Tigh had assumed it was only a matter of time before something blew up in his face.

He simply hadn't known what would be the trigger. The last thing he'd wanted was a calamity with the natives.

As Tigh entered the new Council chambers, he paused a moment to drink it all in. Ryis had outdone himself building this new headquarters for the Council. If they were serious about living on the planet, he argued, they should have a seat of authority in New Caprica City equivalent in importance to what they expected on a battlestar.

This was the first time Tigh had entered the chamber since Ryis finished it. There was a chandelier. The table was of a sturdy wood that the carpenters had polished to a high sheen. Glasses of water were set out for everyone, and a floral arrangement dominated the table.

Tigh wasn't allergic to flowers. That was his only consolation as he took his seat at the head of the table. Apollo glared at him but said nothing. Tigh read the report from the Commander in silence. He then read a report from Ryis, who was late attending the meeting. No one seemed to object to that.

"I appreciate you consolatory demeanor," Tigh addressed Apollo, recalling the many times in the past they'd had to extricate themselves from other problems that seemed insoluble.

"We've had too much anger already," said Apollo. "We've gotten into this mess because of anger."

Tigh scratched his chin. They were off to an interesting start. "You must understand that the Council represents the people. We have always striven to be democratic even during our greatest peril. The people in overwhelming numbers have made it clear that they wish to stay here and

colonize the planet. They will not be moved in this decision by you and the warriors, or by opposition from the indigenous population."

Apollo cleared his voice. "President Tigh, there is more than one issue here. The question of how long we stay on this planet is not the cause of our immediate problem. I make no secret of my commitment to the long range goal of finding Earth. But even if those on my side of the debate agreed that we should stay here forever, there are two difficulties.

"The first is that we are guests of the Gamon. Whether they agreed to let us stay for a while or unto the tenth generation, we are violating the agreement we made with them when we insult their customs and reward their mildest opposition with wholesale slaughter."

Tigh sensed tension in the room. He wasn't worried about regular members of the Council. But there were some warriors on his right and civilians on his left that gave him reason for concern. He appreciated that they were separated by the table, making it that much harder for them to leap across the short distance and begin throttling one another.

"And the second difficulty?" Tigh prompted Apollo.

"We still don't know how much time this planet has left. The analysis of the red sun is not over."

"I sometimes wonder if we'll have an answer to that question," the President lamented. "But this not meeting is not about that."

"No, it isn't," Apollo admitted. "This is about the crime we have committed against the Gamon and what they'll have to say about all this. I notice that no representative of the natives is present."

"How could they be," the president wanted to know, "when our policy toward them is the purpose of this meeting?"

The commander of the fleet and the president of the Council allowed silence to settle over the room like one of the native's blankets. Finally, Tigh found the words he needed to say.

"The Gamon will have to accept the fact that there is more than enough room on Paradis for all of us to live together in peace."

Athena couldn't stop herself from laughing, although a disapproving stare from her brother cut it short. She bit her tongue and choked off the sound.

"Live together in peace," Apollo echoed the words. "Wouldn't that be nice? Like we did with the Borellian Noman so long ago." He hesitated to say the next words because Gar'Tokk was present. "We came very close to genocide with the Nomen. Are we going to make the same horrible mistake all over again?"

Tigh had imagined this conversation many times before. He had rehearsed what he must say. "Hopefully we have grown as a people since that low point in our history. We have learned from our mistakes."

"I'm not so sure," said Apollo. "I'd like to pass the floor to Starbuck and let him tell this august company how much we've grown."

Tigh recognized Starbuck, who didn't beat around the bush. He stood up and faced the Chair. "The construction crews fired on unarmed Gamon and killed them in cold blood." He sat back down again.

Without waiting to be recognized, Boomer threw in, "A testament to our evolution as a species?"

Tigh frowned. "I've been informed that they were becoming hostile and disrupting our crews."

"Without weapons?" Apollo mocked the president's concern. "How much danger are they supposed to represent? Never mind that this is their

world and we are here by their permission and invitation."

Gar'Tokk might have remained silent, as he so often did on occasions of this kind. But he spoke now.

"The Gamon will not permit you to build your technological monstrosities in places sacred to them. They never gave permission for that. They will die first."

Gar'Tokk had nothing more to say but the spokesman for the other side chose that moment for a dramatic entrance. Apollo could tell that Ryis was enjoying his newfound popularity. If the man had had a cape, he would have thrown it over his shoulder.

Apollo promised himself that he would turn to Baltar for insights into the psychology of Ryis, the man who would build Paradis.

"Let them die!" said Ryis with a smile.

"What?" was all Tigh could muster in response to so final a solution.

Now there were ugly murmurs from others in the room; but none of that emotional violence came from a single warrior.

"Survival of the fittest," Ryis continued. "That's the rule of nature, is it not? As that rule operates in the natural world they love so much, so let that rule prevail in this world we now share."

"You're sick!" said Starbuck, his anger barely under control.

"We'll see who's sick and who's the doctor," said Ryis.

"The Grim Reaper is your doctor," Starbuck threw back.

Before there was enough heat in the room to power a battlestar's reactor, Tigh attempted to regain control. "Gentlemen, if you have nothing more constructive to say, we can end this meeting right now."

"My apologies to the Council," said Ryis. "I do have another argument to advance. It becomes more obvious every day that Apollo and his merry band no longer speak for the majority of us, if they ever did."

"I have already raised the issue of democracy," said Tigh, "during the part of the meeting to which your absence was duly noted."

Chastened, Ryis bowed his head. "Again, please accept my apologies. My duties have never been more demanding. I bring up the matter of a popular mandate because I'm sure that Commander Apollo would confuse the issue regarding the native population, as if they could exercise a vote affecting our fate."

Apollo wasn't about to let him get away with that. "When we ignore their modest requests concerning our settlements, we violate their property, Ryis. What about contracts? What about treaties? How does one exercise a vote to disenfranchise others?"

"This isn't a schoolroom," Ryis taunted him. "This is real life. We have suffered more greatly than any other people in the universe. We are chosen for great things. Now with the evidence that the Thirteenth Tribe once reached this planet, we have a greater claim to this world than the Gamon."

"But what if the Gamon are descended from that tribe?" It was Tigh who spoke, expressing his thoughts out loud. So much had happened lately that it was impossible not to consider myriad possibilities.

Ryis was taken aback by the president's remark. "These primitives?" he asked. "I suppose they might be descendants, but if that is the case they have degenerated. We have not!"

Normally, Starbuck didn't care to speak at public meetings any more than Gar'Tokk, but Ryis pissed him off the same way Baltar used to. He almost spat out his words.

"Hey, it's one thing to fight Cylons or any other enemy that wants to destroy us. But these people you killed have never been violent toward us. I believe in going all the way against an enemy that intends us harm, but today you made us a brand-new enemy. You are responsible for this, Ryis. We've acted like the Cylons and I'm ashamed of us."

Ryis shook his head. "That's a poor analogy, warrior. The natives don't have the power to harm us."

"That's no defense of the lethal actions taken against the natives," said the president. "My decision is that the construction workers were within their rights to use any means to remove the protestors, short of violence. I agree with Ryis that the terms of our agreement with the Gamon are too vague to allow them to interrupt important building projects; but I agree with Apollo that the killing of these Gamon was a grave error that will complicate our future relations with the native population."

This statement was greeted with a profound silence that every politician and judge learns to appreciate. A little bit had been given to both sides. They were mulling it over, outraged that the other side had been granted anything but savoring the victory, however small, for their side.

Apollo broke the spell. "I don't see how our suffering at the hands of the Cylons justifies bad treatment of the Gamon. That doesn't make any sense at all!"

Ryis grinned and said, "It's our turn!"

"Enough!" thundered Tigh. "This is not a debating society. We won't settle this today. I intend to convene a committee to investigate every detail of the regrettable incident and report back to me. Commander Apollo, you will be able to continue your presentation at the next Council meeting!"

Sheba woke up with a start. Night had fallen. The last thing she remembered was staring up at the clouds of Paradis, thanking the Lords of Kobol for her survival. That had to be the best piece of flying she'd done in her entire career. But somehow a white cloud in the sky had suddenly transformed itself into the moon.

She had never fallen asleep that quickly in her life. Landing the dead Viper had used up all of her resources. Delighted to be alive, her body had shut down and recharged. But as she woke up in the still night of Paradis, she became aware that she wasn't alone.

A rustling in the leaves was not what Sheba wanted to hear. A thick odor assaulting her nostrils did nothing to settle her nerves. Worst of all, she had a shooting pain in her neck.

If an animal was about to attack, could she move swiftly enough to save her life? Was the pain a delayed injury from the whiplash she hadn't been able to avoid in the crash? Or was it only a trivial ache from lying on the hard ground all this time?

Damn, she wished she hadn't passed out. She wasn't going to be any good to Dalton and the others if she found herself dinner for some carnivore of Paradis.

The sound was coming nearer. Sheba inched her hand down her thigh. It would be just her luck if her blaster had fallen out. Her hand gripped the handle, trigger finger moving into its accustomed place. At least she would have a chance.

The noise was closer. Any moment her visitor would be upon her. She hoped the teeth and claws wouldn't be too sharp.

With a shout, she turned her head and unholstered the weapon. She figured that the noise and sudden movement would chase away most

animals. She was grateful that her head turned and her arm worked. In addition to the welcome discovery that she wasn't paralyzed, there was the author of the noise.

The Gamon woman stared at her. If Sheba's shout startled her, the woman did a fabulous job of hiding that fact. As for the Viper pilot lying on the ground, there were several aspects of the woman that left Sheba nonplussed.

This was the first native woman she'd ever met. She was also the first native in Sheba's limited experience who was plain dirty. The animal skins she wore actually stank, and were draped about her scrawny body in a careless fashion. All in all, she was a most regrettable specimen.

The natives Sheba had met before were all tall males. Their eyes were clear and profiles angular. They had firm muscles without an ounce of fat. The clothes they wore were clean and multicolored, not the shapeless brown rags that Sheba saw before her in this wooded glen.

But the important thing was that the woman did not seem to mean her any harm. In fact, she seemed eager to help. She held out a hand and Sheba took it.

The woman helped the hero of many a space battle to her feet.

Sheba wished that she'd studied the difficult native tongue or could establish a telepathic link with the woman. But there was nothing like that, and no way for Sheba to thank the woman.

The Gamon was prepared. She communicated to Sheba with sign language. Then she smiled. Sheba had doubted that craggy, worn face was capable of a smile. She smiled back. That would have to suffice as a "thank you."

The woman gestured for Sheba to follow her. Her warrior instincts nudged her to be wary—she'd been in too much danger in her life to take anything on face value. One moment all could be splendid and the next it was time to rack up a body count.

But Sheba wasn't a paranoid or a sociopath. The odds were that everything was as it seemed. She bet on the best outcome and reflected that she enjoyed an inner peace that someone like Baltar could never enjoy.

The woman led her over a hill and into a small valley. The trek was brief and that was good because Sheba felt a little wobbly. The crash landing must have affected her more than she realized.

When she saw the cave, there was a moment of alarm. But her guide patted her arm and encouraged her to follow. Inside the cave there was a smoldering torch, which the native took from its wall socket.

Suddenly there was the sound of shouts in the distance and the woman gestured for Sheba to be silent. The woman used her free hand to make a chopping sign, a universal symbol of aggression.

Sheba nodded. It was only a matter of time, she supposed, before they would meet Gamon who were more savage than the ones with whom they made first contact. She felt disappointed, hoping that Paradis had somehow beaten the rules of the universe and produced a completely safe and sane humanoid population.

Of course, she didn't know about the killings encouraged by Ryis. If she had, Sheba might have wondered if that crime had produced a disturbance in the force that held these natives together. Maybe the honeymoon was over.

The Gamon woman led Sheba deeper into the cave. Several hundred steps later another light flickered in the distance. Artificial light! And then

Sheba heard a familiar voice.

"Troy!" she cried out. The Native woman made no move to stop her. They were deep enough in the cave that the war party outside couldn't hear them.

"Sheba!" He was just as excited to see her.

The others were there—and alive!

They sat and talked. They brought each other up to date as best they could. Troy examined Sheba's eyes to make sure that she didn't have a concussion.

"Who is this Gamon?" Sheba finally asked. "Why is she helping us?"

"That's what Dalton said when she first showed up," said Trays. "We were searching for food and she saved us from a war party. We don't know why she's been helping us but we aren't going to give her a hard time about it."

"I didn't think we'd ever have a problem like this on Paradis," said Sheba. "Hiding out from Gamon."

"Neither did I," said Troy. "I thought the Gamon were all one big happy family. Maybe we've found the poor cousins."

"Then how could they have the power to knock out our Vipers?" Rhaya wanted to know.

"They couldn't," said Sheba. "There must be another answer."

"There is," volunteered Dalton, holding up some of the metal fragments they'd found in the cave. "These are the product of advanced technology. We must have flown into some kind of radiation field. But whatever it is, nothing showed on our scanners before our power vanished."

"We have a mystery," said Troy.

Suddenly, Dalton groaned and fell back. Sheba held her in her arms. "What's wrong?"

"She's really hurt," said Rhaya. "We didn't realize how badly at first."

Before they could attend to Dalton, the native woman grunted. They weren't sure if she could even speak her own tongue—maybe she was mute—but her hearing was more acute than theirs.

The war party was entering the cave.

"I'd hoped that we were inside one of their taboo places," said Troy. "I guess not."

The woman gestured for them to follow.

"We've explored further into the back of this cave," Rhaya told Sheba. "There is a long, flat shelf of rock that descends to several tunnels. We've only gone a short distance into some of them, but the tunnels may go on for miles."

"This is a great time to find out!" said Sheba, taking the other woman's arm.

"Right," said Troy. "Let's move out."

"I'm right behind you," said Trays.

"I'd rather have you in front!"

"In case there's danger?"

"You're getting the idea!"

Despite the danger, they all laughed. Whatever happened, Sheba was glad that she had found them.

They never saw the war party. Whether the Gamon following them simply didn't know which tunnel they had taken or refused to enter them on principle was unimportant. They were safe from the danger behind.

Now all they need do is fear the danger ahead.

The day that Baltar began arguing with his headaches, he decided he would have to talk to someone or go completely crazy. They all thought he was half mad anyway so he could find a sympathetic audience for that particular subject matter.

Then there was the problem of the nightmares. Every time he promised himself they couldn't get any worse he proved himself a liar. The latest kept him awake for a long time because it ended in a cliff-hanger and he didn't want to pick up where he left off.

It began with a spinal chord crawling out of the back of one of the reptilian Cylons. Then a red eye flew out of one of the Centurion heads and grew two legs like a stick figure so that it could ride the spinal chord that had grown legs of its own like a centipede.

This entire grotesque operation was just fine with Baltar if the resulting monster would just leave him alone. He was doing everything he could not to attract the thing's attention.

For one thing, Baltar was only six inches high. That made it very easy to hide in one of the many boxes that were lying open on their sides with their lids askew.

After making certain that it was empty, he crept inside a nice, big red box. He was smart enough to check first because it would be bad to enter a place of refuge only to find out that some hideous creature was there first, waiting for you with crimson maw and evil intent.

The Centurion eye-man riding on the reptilian Cylon spinal chord was coming closer. He could hear the sh slurping sound it made as it drew near.

Just to be on the safe side, Baltar reached out tentatively and slowly drew the lid shut on the box. Although this would leave him in the dark, it

seemed like a good idea at the time.

How could he know that the red box was a stomach and that closing it would release the digestive juices?

Who would expect that? Or the voices telling him that when the spinal chords and robot eyes stopped fighting and learned to work together, Baltar would be in real trouble? Someone was whispering that civil wars make the strongest monsters.

When bile rose up from his real stomach into his real throat and started choking him, Baltar woke up.

Chapter Twelve

The elder didn't have to be told. He knew of the dire event before it happened. He spent much time in the in-between places. He saw the portents in the blue mist. There were others who spent time in these places. They were old as well, but they were not as old. They did not see as clearly.

The second oldest challenged him. "These newcomers have proven themselves spiritually deficient," he said.

"Too soon to judge them all," he said.

"They are not meant to be part of the consciousness," said his critic who was always impatient. He always ate the largest portion of the dreaming herb.

They often argued about other things besides the newcomers. The second oldest used to think the elder placed too much faith in Yarto. He thought that before Apollo came to Paradis.

They even argued about the consciousness of plants and animals. All this and more were the subjects of the in-between places when the blue mist flowed across their placid brows.

But now there was only one subject: dead Gamon, slain by the construction workers of New Caprica City. The whole idea was unthinkable.

Something would have to be done.

"Mistakes breed mistakes," said the elder. "We must wait before reaching a final decision."

"You are too patient," the second oldest berated him.

The elder raised a withered hand. "When you learn to travel in time and undo your own mistakes, we will discuss my failings."

A large, black bird screamed outside the dream hut where the Gamon wise men were having their discussion. With a heavy flapping of wings, it flew toward the gibbous moon.

Normally a bird of the day, it flew all night toward the other side of the planet where a handful of Colonials, buried under the ground, looked for answers.

Some might have called it a portent.

The good news for the trapped Colonials was that the Gamon war party did not pursue them into the tunnel selected by their native guide. The bad news was the tunnel.

It had started out all right. They were able to stand up and there was elbow room. When it began to narrow, Troy still had faith in the Gamon woman who led them with such certainty. The others did not feel as confident, especially Rhaya.

When the tunnel narrowed again even Troy began to question the confidence he'd placed in the woman. But what chance did any of them have at that point but to soldier on?

Sheba reminded herself that her first impression of their newfound friend and guide had been negative. The woman had led them this far in safety. But as the tunnel became ever more narrow it was difficult not to worry.

They had abandoned the smoky torch some time ago. They still had their flashlights but Troy rightly suggested they use only one at the front for the native woman who had quickly grasped the function of the item.

Dalton breathed in dust and began coughing. They all stopped and gave her the opportunity to regain her breath. Troy, who was right behind the guide, indicated that she should move forward. That was when the tunnel began to widen again to everyone's relief.

The tunnel let out into an underground cavern of tremendous size. Best of all, the walls provided light by means of a generous growth of luminescent fungus. They came out onto a natural shelf of rock allowing them to stand up and see various paths to the wide floor of the cavern below them.

Again Sheba wished that she could thank their benefactor in some manner other than the sign language they were using.

"I'll go first," Rhaya volunteered. Before the native guide could get her attention, the headstrong girl took a likely route that, unfortunately, was not the best one.

"Oh, no," said Sheba as she saw Rhaya lose her footing a short distance above the cavern floor. Rhaya didn't have far to fall but the tumble was bad enough.

The Gamon woman reached the injured girl first, with Sheba and Troy in close pursuit.

"I'm an idiot," said Rhaya and no one contradicted her.

"Let me check that," said Sheba, closely examining the scrapes and bruises. "You don't seem to have broken anything."

"Not from lack of trying," Rhaya continued berating herself. She looked sheepishly over at Dalton. "I was unfair to you," she said about her earlier criticisms.

"Forget it," said Dalton.

"Maybe I was jealous that all the other women around me are hurt in some way and I wanted my piece of male attention."

Troy gently punched her arm. "Ouch!" replied Rhaya.

"Well said," said Trays.

"Are we certain that the, uh, bad Gamon wouldn't follow us in here?" Sheba asked, shifting everyone back to what was really important.

Troy shrugged. "I don't think so," he said. "Our friend hasn't let us down yet. If she wasn't on our side, I think we would have learned that by now!"

"Yeah, but if this isn't taboo for her why would it be taboo for them?" asked Trays.

"I don't have an answer to that," he admitted. "But a lot is going on here that I don't pretend to understand."

As if to underline his point, Dalton crouched down and retrieved something from the ground. She held out her trophy: more of that mysterious metal.

The Gamon woman indicated that they were safe for the moment and should rest for a while. They made camp.

"I want someone guarding the opening of those tunnels," Troy said. "Just in case."

"Right," said Sheba, "and I'll take the first watch."

"Anything to get out of a work detail?" Rhaya asked, but with a big grin. Everyone took the remark the way she had intended. Sheba didn't know it but her presence had worked a miracle on the morale of the small group.

They were all daggit-tired more than they were hungry. They had plenty of water with them, but no food. Sheba was the logical choice for the first watch because she had so recently slept.

Underground, they had no way of knowing night from day. But by the time they were all fit and ready to resume their journey, Sheba assumed it was probably morning outside. She'd decided that she was lucky to have been found by their mute friend at night. If the war party had been around in the day when she crashed they would have probably captured her.

Of course, once they were in the world of the caverns it didn't matter. She couldn't get over the underground light with its blue-green radiance. It was almost like discovering another planet inside of Paradis.

The Gamon woman gestured that they follow her. She definitely had a destination in mind. On this trip there was only one direction and that was forward.

Dalton discovered the first bone. She was still on the lookout for more pieces of metal and that's why she reached down for the small gray object.

"It's only a rock," she said.

"No—it's a petrified bone," said Troy, kneeling down to join the investigation.

"That's nothing," said Trays who had gone ahead with the guide. His voice drifted back from around a bend in the cavern wall. "You won't believe this."

Rushing to join him, they weren't disappointed.

Spread out before them was a forest of petrified bones, all white and gray in the perpetual twilight. But the bones were the least of the spectacle.

Beyond them was a large graveyard of the last objects they'd expected to find on this world—spaceships! Everywhere they saw the remnants of destroyed craft of advanced design. There wasn't an aircraft among them. Veterans of battlestars would recognize a ship made for interstellar travel if they only had a knob or lever to work with. Spread out for their delectation was a feast of wrecked hulls and disintegrated thrusters.

"What the frack happened on this planet?" Troy wanted to know.

The tour wasn't over. The Gamon woman ran on ahead, gesturing that they follow. They did.

Beyond the line of smashed ships it was easier to see the main point of interest as far as their guide was concerned.

"I don't believe it," whispered Sheba.

Before them, making a mute confession of the hubris and tragedy of an advanced culture, was the wreck of a great city. Compared to what it must have been in its great days of glory, New Caprica City was a joke.

The Gamon walked over to Sheba and surprised her by reaching out and touching the younger woman's forehead with her rough and callused hands. A telepathic link was established with the clarity and suddenness of an electric shock.

Mental images flooded into the daughter of Cain. She'd never experienced anything this vivid. She caught her breath as she saw and heard everything that Gamon woman wanted them to know.

"Are you all right?" Troy asked when the contact was broken. The old native left them and began searching through the ruins for mushrooms and other edibles that might grow in this vast cavern.

"There was a great war," Sheba began as if in a trance. "The entire planet was consumed by flames. Millions died. It seems that her people are

the descendants of that world."

Sheba still seemed to be seeing the pictures that had been implanted in her brain. Troy helped her sit down as the others gathered around to hear.

"How can this be?" Trays seemed to ask the universe at large. "The civilization on Paradis is so primitive, if you can even call it a civilization."

Sheba blinked a few times and saw the others. She took a deep breath and answered. "I'm beginning to understand. They made a decision, all of them. They decided never again to follow the path of their forefathers. They decided to live simple and peaceful lives."

"Peaceful?" Trays mocked the idea. "Tell that to the war party that was hunting us."

Sheba continued. "Our small piece of the story can distract us from seeing the whole picture. The Gamon chose to live without a high level of technology or military weaponry."

"I don't know," Troy wondered aloud. "The ones we've dealt with up to this point seem awfully healthy for such a primitive lifestyle. They don't seem to grow many crops or do much hunting and yet they are well fed. Something is very strange about all this."

"You can say that again," agreed Rhaya.

"Wait a minute!" Dalton chimed in. "We don't know exactly how they manage their lives but Sheba is telling us what they don't do! Just look at the chaos all around us here in this place. Maybe there's something to what they tried to do in banning war and the machines of war."

"That has been their culture for many yahren," said Sheba.

Dalton continued. "And now we arrive with our powerful weapons and so-called civilized society and attempt to alter their world back into the very

thing they gave up eons ago! No wonder they resent us."

They were silent for a while, all except the native who was humming a song to herself. She didn't seem to be paying any attention to the Colonial conference.

"They've kept from us how they must really feel," said Troy.

"But Ryis is changing all that," Sheba reminded them.

Troy spat on the ground. "I'm an invader," he said. "Maybe we don't belong here. This is their world and they think we're trying to take over."

Rhaya whistled. That got everyone's attention. "I'm an invader, too," she said. "I just invaded this cave with sound waves. So what? We *are* taking over! Our people don't want to leave and I don't blame them. We've been on the run for twenty-five yahren. We're tired. Too many have died searching for this so-called mythical planet Earth! I say that we either stay here or go back where we came from and retake our home world from the Cylons!"

Sheba was impressed. "You sound like my father, Commander Cain."

Rhaya smiled in acknowledgment. "Your father always understood the moral difference between running away and falling back to regroup for a more successful battle plan. As long as we run, the Cylons will see us as weak. They want to destroy us because they have no respect for us."

"I'm not sure about that," said Sheba, now recovered from the effects of the telepathic visions. "Maybe the Cylons have too much respect for *us*. Maybe they fear us."

Rhaya shrugged. "Whatever the truth of that, we haven't fought them well enough and that's why they keep coming. We may be winning the smaller battles but they expect to eventually win the war! Time, leverage

and position are on their side. We are following a defeatist plan that can only end in our complete destruction."

She pointed at the ruins of the city. "The Gamon took the wrong lesson from that," she said. "It's a warning to be strong instead of throwing away your weapons and becoming like that woman." She pointed disdainfully at the Gamon picking mushrooms for their meal.

Rhaya made a fist and punched her open palm. Although an effective gesture, it also reopened a wound from her fall and her right hand began bleeding again.

"Let me help you," said Sheba, deeply conflicted by what the younger woman had just said. She had often felt the same as her father but reasoned her way to different conclusions. Rhaya sounded so much like her father that it was uncanny.

As Sheba wiped away the trickle of blood she noticed something as surprising as the colossal, spectacular ruins. Small things can also take the breath away.

Rhaya had a birthmark on her arm. It was the same birthmark as Sheba's father. Deep under the ground of Paradis was not a place where Sheba expected to find a sister.

No wonder that when the girl spoke it sounded as if she wanted to raise Cain!

Apollo was glad to be back aboard the *Galactica*. After the frustrating Council meeting far below in his personal hell, he had to climb a ladder back to the stars so he could be at peace.

Ryis had reminded Apollo that he'd specially prepared the commander a palatial suite in the city that put anything aboard a battlestar to shame. Apollo wanted to tell the man exactly where he could put that suite.

His quarters on the *Galactica* were a tonic to his soul right now. He fell into a deep, dreamless sleep from which he awoke refreshed.

He hadn't checked the time before he closed his eyes. He could have been under for five minutes or five centuries. But when he came to he was being prodded back to wakefulness by someone who literally couldn't remember the last time he'd had a decent night's sleep.

Funny thing that Apollo went asleep thinking about one sarcastic bastard and woke up to the face of another of the same breed. But after his recent encounters with Ryis, he was delighted to see Baltar. The man was a prince of honesty in comparison to the architect.

In another micron, Apollo noticed that his old nemesis was being accompanied by a guard.

"Have I awakened you?" Baltar asked cautiously, the words belied by a devious smile. "I apologize but I feel that we must speak before it's too late."

"What's your business?" Apollo asked.

Baltar smiled at the guard, who got the idea. The commander had extended an invitation.

"You may wait outside," Apollo told the guard. The man withdrew as his commanding officer sat up and put his feet on the ground. Apollo didn't like to deal with Baltar when flat on his back.

"May I sit down?" asked Baltar. Apollo nodded, wishing the old reprobate would get on with it.

At last, Baltar began to spin his web of words. "First, let me say that although it may not always be obvious I am most appreciative of your efforts in allowing an old and weary politician such as myself a place of some responsibility in this new society that you are building."

Apollo shook his head. "You don't have to go through the usual ritual with me," he admonished his old foe. "The best thing you can do right now is speak plainly. I know you have it in you when there's a good reason. Well, right now I need your gifts for introspection and honesty."

Baltar had not expected that. He was tempted to offer Apollo his hand but thought better of it. Lately, he had been so caught up in his own problems that he let himself forget that the commander of the fleet had more trouble than anyone else. Baltar usually kept himself informed on current events. He was not as up on Paradis as he should be, although he was sufficiently well informed that he expected the lid to blow any day now.

"I enjoy teaching," said Baltar, unprompted.

"That doesn't surprise me."

"As I said before, it means a lot to me."

Apollo nodded. "I'm happy for you. I've heard that the students appreciate your self-deprecating sense of humor and have requested that you be allowed to continue your teaching duties. I think the Council will approve—maybe their only right decision in the immediate future."

Baltar almost did a double take. He wasn't sure that hadn't actually dreamed Apollo's last remark. Lately, Baltar feared more than anything else the mounting evidence that he could no longer trust his own mind.

The teacher decided to tell as much to Apollo as he dared. "I'm pleased to hear these good reports from my students. That is more than I deserve. But now, we must speak of more important things. I am hesitant to share this with you, but I feel I must. The issue is too important to leave on my conscience."

Baltar stopped and took a deep breath. Apollo had never known the man to have difficulties in spewing out copious amounts of verbiage. Something was different this time.

"Go ahead," Apollo prompted.

"I have been having a series of dreams. They are not ordinary dreams, of that I'm certain. They are specific and detailed nightmares adding up to a kind of message."

Very few people in Apollo's experience could tell him something like this and receive a serious hearing. But this was Baltar, the last person to give in to emotional outbursts or suffer from hysteria.

"Go on," said Apollo.

Baltar wiped perspiration from his brow. Clearly, this wasn't easy for him. "These prophetic dreams, I believe, have given me a rare portal into the Cylon world as it may be evolving right now or in the near future. As you know, I am not a man given to whimsy or speculation. At least I didn't used to be."

"What do you conclude from the dreams?" asked Apollo.

"Other than I never want to sleep again? At first I thought the nightmares didn't have any meaning at all. There is a wide variety of despicable images. I won't belabor those. You don't want to hear about them, believe me. But the cumulative effect is clear. *They* are having a civil war—or will have a civil war. The biologicals and the mechanicals will struggle for supremacy. Out of that battle will come a more powerful Cylon race.

"If these visions are true, they will be more dangerous than ever before. And they will come after us again."

"And?" asked Apollo, waiting for the other boot to drop.

"They will find us if we stay here, Apollo, and we won't survive."

Hearing these words were a confirmation of his own instincts. From the beginning, Apollo felt that Paradis was too good to be true as a home world for the Colonials. But as a place of temporary refuge it had seemed just fine.

He wanted to blame Ryis for everything but realized that he was being unfair. If not the architect, it would have been someone else.

"The people are exhausted," said Apollo.

"Yes."

"I have the unenviable task of persuading thousands of bone-weary Colonials to forsake this all-too-perfect world for the cold and isolation of deep space."

After he said that, Apollo saw something in Baltar's expression he never expected to find there—compassion. Compassion for Apollo.

That was enough to convince the commander that the man who once betrayed them all might be the cause of their ultimate salvation.

This went beyond what Baltar had done to redeem himself in the Ur cloud.

Now there was only the trivial difficulty of stopping a war between Colonials and Gamon, finding adequate resources to rebuild and expand the fleet, and talk everyone into leaving comfort and security behind perhaps forever.

"You're thinking about your father," said Baltar.

It was true. Adama's kind visage had flashed into Apollo's mind at the moment Baltar spoke.

"Are you adding mind-reading to your repertoire?" asked Apollo.

"No," said Baltar softly. "I was remembering him as well."

Chapter Thirteen

President Tigh had a pet. He'd found it all by himself. Lately he'd been very careful not to accept gifts from any well-wishers, mostly because he doubted that anyone was wishing anyone else well right about now.

So if he wanted a pet, the best plan of action was just to find it on his own, especially now that he was a gentleman farmer on his small, private, safe, secluded little estate with the lovely garden in the back.

The trouble was that no one seemed willing to respect that the estate was private or safe or secluded. At this rate, Tigh would have to go back to his presidential quarters aboard the battlestar so that he could have some privacy. There were fewer avenues of access aboard a spaceship. On a planet, ye olde mudball, there were too' many ways of sneaking up on a man who was just trying to grow a few fruits and vegetables and mind his own business.

So he'd found himself a pet. He'd intended for the critter to be a fierce watchdog, a guardian of its master's solitude. A Gamon showed him how to trap one of the blooies when it was only a pup. Tigh made up the name because he couldn't pronounce the Native word. The animal made a sound like *bleweeeeeee* when it was hungry.

The fierce snout and big teeth were misleading. The big floppy ears were more indicative of the animal's demeanor. It had a tongue as long as a man's arm and loved nothing better than licking anyone in sight.

Tigh's only hope was that Cyranus (he named it after a galaxy because of its galaxy-sized heart) would scare off unwanted visitors by making its

sound. The blooie was always hungry and the sound was startling on first contact.

So far no one had been scared away. This disappointed the president because every visitor wanted to talk about one subject: the impending war with the Gamon. Whether pro or con, that seemed to be the only subject.

Tigh hoped that just one visitor might care to discuss the properties of red sunlight on a new berry he had developed in his copious lack of free time.

Athena could be a pain in the ass when she was in a good mood. Everyone knew that, herself most of all. But when she was royally pissed off, the best course of action was steer a course as far from her perfectly shaped chin as possible, lest someone be inspired to strike a fist against that chin and spoil its beauty.

Starbuck was a brave man. He almost didn't know the meaning of fear—almost, because he wasn't really an idiot. But his relationship with Apollo's sister had pushed the envelope further than he liked.

He was late for a meeting with Athena. That was bad. She'd expected him on the bridge of the *Daedelus*, her center of power and authority. That was worse.

But he didn't know the actual terrible part. She had a mission for him. And the time factor was important.

After recent exchanges between them, he'd fallen into the habit of expecting an urgent summons from Athena to revolve around their personal lives. It was because of this sort of breakdown in a chain of command that numerous military organizations throughout the universe discouraged fraternization between the opposite sex when those members wore the same uniform.

Of course, those organizations were part of large and stable societies where it wasn't essential that every able-bodied person breed and then breed some more. The Galacticans had been forced into a difficult situation. Their numbers had been dwindling before they reached Paradis. Under the circumstances, a group survival strategy trumped any questions of military protocol.

Not a bit of this was in Starbuck's mind as he walked onto the bridge, late as usual.

Nor did a shred of such considerations cross the brow of one thoroughly pissed off Athena, who wanted to know why it was that he couldn't ever be on time.

Somehow Starbuck's sparkling wit and amazing skill in battle saved him again. That, and the fact that there hadn't been a single military execution in the twenty-five yahren history of the Colonial's exodus across the stars.

"We have a serious problem!" Athena snapped. "Troy, Trays and Dalton are lost. Sheba, who went after them, is now missing. There has been a complete breakdown in communications, so we don't know if they're alive or not."

"Frack!"

"We need you to lead a patrol to their last known position. If you notice anything out of the ordinary, don't take any chances, but return immediately to base. Is that understood?"

She waited. Starbuck's silence was not the answer she wanted.

"Is that clear? Acknowledge, Colonel!"

"I hear you," he answered sullenly.

"I wasn't asking about your hearing. We can't afford to lose you or any other pilots right now."

He saluted and began to exit. He almost made it to the door but couldn't stop himself from muttering, "You could have told me all this via communications channels."

This was not a good day for Starbuck. Striding forward with the assurance of command, Athena tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around and she hit him with, "Do you still love her?"

He hadn't expected that. He opened his mouth but nothing came out. So she tried again—

"Cassie! Remember her? Do you still have feelings for her?"

After thinking about the question for all of a micron, he let his legs answer. As he bolted off the bridge, Athena watched him go with sadness in her heart.

She was honest enough with herself to admit that this was not the right time and place for such a question. But her feelings were more relentless than a Cylon armada.

Despite all his flaws, she was still hopelessly in love with Starbuck, maybe in love for the first time in her life.

At times like this her feelings were more painful than ever. Starbuck going on a mission was Starbuck at his best.

She wondered if he would ever be the man of which he was capable, and if he could love her in the manner she'd always desired. Could she have the same intensity of feeling from him that he'd once shown for Cassie?

Would he return her love with the same intensity that she offered her passion to him?

Her shoulders sagged as she returned to her command chair. There was solace in not having to make any decisions. There was peace in regarding the stars.

She had a good view of the fleet, or what was left of it after the dismantling and refurbishing. The desolate fleet seemed lonely and incomplete.

Athena felt lonely. Only those who had known the isolation of command could understand. If others depended on you, it was not the same as being stranded in a wilderness, cut off from all human contact. But it was still lonely when no one could treat you as an equal. The responsibility isolated the leader in a cocoon of decisions and regrets.

Adama had spent his life this way.

Apollo was spending his life this way.

And Athena? She shouted the answer, startling others on the bridge: "Not if I can help it!"

The Vipers were fueled and ready to go. It was a pleasure to fly them. There was something pure about the two concerns of a space pilot: accelerate and estimate! No emotional problems attached themselves to the controls in front of a warrior: *Fire* and *Turbo*.

Starbuck preferred flying to anything, even a three-day furlon. After the latest encounter with Athena, Starbuck needed a mission to maintain his mental health!

It was an added bonus that Bojay and Boomer would be his wing men. They were every bit as reliable as a fact of physics. Why couldn't he find a woman like that? Why couldn't he find a woman more like a photon, or something?

He wasn't comfortable enough to talk about it in the launching bay, but once they screamed into space, long pent-up words crackled into the headsets of his buds.

Starbuck: Hey, Bojay, how did you manage to survive your relationships with women?"

Bojay: I didn't. I only appear to be alive.

Boomer: A good performance.

Bojay: Are you sure you want to listen in on this private and highly sensitive discussion?

Boomer: Well, if you're going to provide free therapy to Starbuck, I'd rather pipe music into my helm.

Starbuck: Don't you have anything to say about women?

Boomer: They win. We lose.

Bojay: Listen to your music!

Boomer: Signing off!

Starbuck: So where were we?

Bojay: I was saying how I only appear to be alive.

Starbuck: Funny, that's what the women around the fleet are saying about you.

Bojay: Bite my thruster! You're jealous that women still find me irresistible, despite my advanced years.

Starbuck: Is that a good thing?

Bojay: Just wait until you reach my age and we'll talk.

Starbuck: But you'll be so much older then, how will I ever catch up?

Boomer: Just checking in, guys. Are you discussing temporal displacement theories or the sexual stamina of senior citizens?

Bojay: Go back to your music, eavesdropper!

Starbuck: Yeah, mind your own business or we'll get Jolly to give you a piggyback ride all over Paradis.

Boomer: If you're going to assault my dignity, I'm outta here!

Bojay: So what else is bothering you about Athena?

Starbuck: What do you mean? I haven't even mentioned Athena.

Bojay: You could fool me. I figure that's all we've been talking about since launch! So you're having problems with Athena again?

Starbuck: Who doesn't? That woman is something else. She makes my celebrated sex-drive look like an impotent daggit!

Bojay: I didn't know that daggits could be impotent except for, you know, that certain operation.

Starbuck: Don't change the subject. I'm going nuts with that woman. Is it so much to ask for a little tender loving care?

Bojay: Correct me if I'm mistaken, but weren't you receiving exactly that from Cassie? Did you pass on her or was it the other way around?

Starbuck: She deserves better than yours truly!

Bojay: I don't get you. With an attitude like that, how is any woman going to give you what you want? Cassie is a woman who knows how to love a man.

Starbuck: That's the problem.

Bojay: Her problem?

Starbuck: My problem.

Bojay: I think you have a few issues to work out, Colonel Starbuck.

Starbuck: Session over?

Bojay: You can pay me later.

Starbuck: Thanks.

Actually, Starbuck felt a lot better. Just having someone listen to him was a tonic after getting into it with Athena. He didn't have to be right. He just wanted his turn at bat. Sometimes the only way he understood his own feelings was to talk it out.

Fighting Cylons was a lot easier.

Now it was time to focus on the mission. He addressed the dynamic duo: "We're going to find out what happened to Sheba, Troy and the rest of the gang." He didn't mention Dalton. He didn't need to. The others knew that she was among the missing.

Boomer wanted to know if the squad leader had any ideas. "We've all checked out this planet," said Starbuck. "There's nothing too dangerous down there."

"There's still that unaccounted sea monster," Bojay reminded them.

"That kind of makes my point," said Starbuck. "That animal didn't come back after the two attacks on the installation. The mining operations probably disturbed its natural habitat. We simply moved the plant."

"It was dangerous," Bojay reminded him.

"To unarmed men!" Apollo amplified his point. "We're looking for five Vipers and their pilots. There is no animal in the sea or air that could account for a disaster of this sort."

"Do you think the Gamon have been holding out on us?" asked Boomer. "Maybe they've hidden away high-tech weapons and have been

putting on an act."

"I don't believe that," said Starbuck.

"Could there be another race on this planet as advanced as we are?" Bojay suggested.

Starbuck wasn't buying any. "No way could that have been hidden from us. My guess is that our friends encountered an atmospheric disturbance of some kind. Maybe a magnetic belt of some kind. That would account for their power being knocked out so they couldn't contact us."

They flew in silence until Boomer spoke what they were all thinking. "Then the same thing could happen to us."

No one said a thing. They didn't need to. They were warriors.

Bojay lifted the cloud of doom. "Hey, everybody knows I'm the better pilot, Starbuck. So you'll have to prove me wrong!"

Starbuck grinned. He hadn't done that since he left Athena's scowl behind him on the Daedelus. "You've been inhaling too many Tylum fumes."

"Race you to Troy's last confirmed location!" Bojay persisted.

Starbuck felt great. This was life—this was purpose. "We shouldn't be doing this," he said "Oh, frack! You're on!"

Thrusters screamed and the landscape unfurled beneath them.

In addition to the country abode and his quarters in space, President Tigh also had offices in New Caprica City. Ryis had insisted on that. Tigh liked the idea that he would have one place to take care of business, little appreciating that wherever he went all the trouble in the world would follow.

Apollo had made an appointment. Tigh appreciated that. He'd also brought his pet which was not about to intimidate the commander. Centarus was fond of Apollo.

"I've been expecting you," said Tigh at the door. "The next Council meeting is almost upon us and you need to prepare."

"What do you expect will happen?" asked a man even more reluctant to engage in politics than the ever more regretful president.

"They will set the agenda for a full vote from the people. The outcome is a foregone conclusion."

"Paradis of Colonials, by Colonials and for Colonials," said Apollo grimly.

"I wish there was a compromise," Tigh said. "I've racked my brain trying to come up with anything."

As he spoke, the native animal crawled into his lap and began licking its remarkable tongue all over his head. Apollo laughed.

"I wish my blooie could lick some sense into my head," said the President.

"Is he good for headaches?" asked Apollo.

The older man ran his dark hand over the darker fur of his favorite living thing. "What makes you ask that?"

Apollo shrugged. "I was thinking about Baltar. His headaches almost kill him and there doesn't seem any medical remedy."

"Baltar," grimaced Tigh. "I haven't thought about him in a while. I'd be ready to take advice even from him if he could solve our dilemma."

"Ryis and his final solutions!" cried Apollo. "I can't believe we're going to wage a war against this simple people. It's one thing going up against an

enemy that possesses armies and modern weapons. Any sane person who isn't a coward can understand that. But to treat a indigenous aboriginal population as if they're animals is disgusting!"

Tigh sighed. "If the people can choose between the two kinds of enemies you outline, they'll always go with the latter. Warriors actually prefer an enemy who can fight back. The average person wants an enemy that can't do much better than throw rocks. Then they become all indignant and pretend that each rock is the same as the taste of a pulsar. They don't have the pogeas of warriors."

Apollo smiled. Once a warrior, always a warrior. No wonder he liked Tigh so much, even when the man found himself caught between two irreconcilable positions. But this was a time of truth between the two old friends.

"The blood of thousands will be on our hands," Apollo said simply. "Every Colonial will share in the guilt."

Tigh went to a window. Not every chamber in New Caprica City had windows, but the president had insisted. Standing at just the right angle, he had a glimpse of the sky.

"What can we do?" he asked. "After twenty-five yahren in space they see this planet as their final salvation. It's the homeland for which they've ached. They don't want to hear the word Earth ever again!"

"I've heard that Ryis wants to rename Paradis and call it Earth," said Apollo. "The bastard has a sense of humor."

Tigh turned from the window and faced Apollo, seeing the same color in the other man's eyes he'd just been enjoying in the scrap of sky outside his window. "After their last two disappointments, who are we to deny

them? We have to accept reality. We've got to try and turn this mess into the most positive situation we can."

"There is no positive in this situation."

"We have a democracy, remember? The majority must get what it wants, good and hard."

Apollo surprised the president with what he said next. "This has nothing to do with democracy."

"What do you mean?" asked Tigh, raising an eyebrow.

Apollo gestured at papers on his desk. "Let us suppose that we are a dictatorship and you have all the power right in front of you. All you need to fulfill your will is issue an edict. Let us suppose you decide to take this planet from the natives. No one would call that democracy, right?"

"No."

"Now a bunch of us come from the stars and vote to make that same decision. In both cases, Tigh, no one is concerned about the votes of the Gamon."

Tigh sighed. "That's a facile argument. If we go against our own people, they will replace us and we'll lose any possibility of asserting influence over future policies."

"Fine," said Apollo. "But let's stop pretending that the concept of democracy means anything when a more powerful group occupies the land of the less powerful. If we really believed in democracy, we'd be planning on bringing the Gamon into our way of life. If we believed in individual rights the way the Cylons think we do, we'd have behaved differently with the Nomen. And we wouldn't fight this war now. Find me a dictator who oppresses his people and we'll talk about a war!"

Tigh laughed. "You'd have a harder time convincing your fellow Colonials then. Ryis would certainly advocate doing business with such a fine and upstanding leader."

Apollo thought about Baltar, the expert in such matters. At some point he would have to share with Tigh what Baltar had told him, but this was not the time.

Tigh became serious again. "We made mistakes with the Nomen, that's for certain. But you have made amends, Apollo. You, personally. Do you think your friend Gar'Tokk would help convince the Gamon that we can live together in peace?"

Apollo shrugged. "I hope so. We have to make every effort. I will talk to him again."

At this moment, any victory was like ambrosia to Tigh so he followed his inspiration and reached into the desk. "Look what I've got!" he said, for a second seeming like Koren with a new game.

"I could use a glass right now," Apollo said happily.

They toasted each other with the amber colored liquid. They enjoyed a very unpolitical silence as long as they could persuade themselves that decisions are best when postponed.

"I loved your father," Tigh finally broke the silence. "He may have been wrong about one thing."

Apollo straightened in his chair. The brief interlude was over. "Nobody's perfect," he said. "What are you driving at?"

"The Earth," said Tigh, "Maybe your father was wrong to say that Earth is the best place for us. The future is not static. Maybe the universe and the future have changed since the Ur cloud; maybe we were supposed to find

and colonize this planet instead of Earth. Besides, how do we really know that anything is certain? I believe that we make our own future!"

The president breathed deeply and then finished off his drink. Apollo continued to sip his as though everything he'd just heard was a bit much to swallow all at once.

"That was quite a speech," he said. "But the problems on Paradis exist in and of themselves. We have to face these issues regardless of how we feel about Earth."

Tigh grinned. "That was an answer worthy of Adama. He'd be proud of you."

Unfazed by flattery, Apollo plowed ahead. "Something isn't right about the situation on this planet and I'm going to find out what it is. As for the Gamon, I'm not sure that they want our help or way of life, but that hardly matters when we aren't offering them anything but violence when they stand in our way."

Tigh frowned. "I take what you say seriously. Maybe we can do better with these people than we did with the Nomen."

Apollo elaborated his position. "We are wrong on two levels, Tigh. First, we aren't offering them what we think is good. Second, we aren't interested in respecting what they value anyway."

"Oh, hell," said Tigh, pouring another full glass for himself. "The Gamon are so primitive that they don't know what's best for them anyway."

Seeing that the conversation was getting nowhere fast, Apollo stood, always a subtle hint to the careful politician. "I'll talk to Gar'Tokk. But let me leave you with something to ponder. What if the Gamon know something we don't?"

"Then they may take their great wisdom to the grave if we aren't all very careful," answered Tigh, standing and offering his hand.

The warrior's hand in the hand of the ex-warrior was as good a symbol as any of co-existence. But did it mean anything beyond the society of Colonials?

Apollo left in search of Gar'Tokk, heart sinking at the thought of how much he intended to place on the shoulders of his Nomen friend who did not like to be touched.

Chapter Fourteen

The new manager of the ocean project had been promoted from engineer. Having seen firsthand what had happened to his predecessor, it felt more like a punishment than an advance in his career.

Every day he made a formal request that warriors be sent to find and destroy the sea monster that had so far claimed the lives of two Colonials. The creature had not returned since devouring the previous manager. The official position seemed to be that if a carnivorous animal moved on to different feeding grounds then the problem had solved itself.

All questions of territoriality aside, the new manager found the official position to be pure felgercarb. The monster might come back! Maybe it had a very wide area making up its territory. Maybe it would be satisfied eating a few humans per yahren in this area.

That seemed an unacceptably high price to pay for co-existence with native life forms. After all, the Council had started passing stringent measures against the Gamon, and they hadn't killed or eaten a single Colonial.

The original excuse against harming the sea monster didn't hold water. The idea was that the Gamon would be offended if action were taken against such a rare life form. Now with war clouds sailing across the horizon, that turned out to be another baseless worry.

The manager was about to give up hope of ever achieving a damned thing when the unexpected happened. Three Gamon came to his rescue. They communicated with sign language.

He provided them with a boat. They turned down his offer of men to accompany them. They also had no use for the explosives he tried to give them.

Their only request was that the Colonials shut off their equipment that extracted minerals from the sea and turned salt water into drinking water. The steady thumping of the machines slowed down and came to a stop.

Surely the Gamon realized that the humans would start up the equipment again whether the natives succeeded or not in dealing with the marine beast. The manager told himself that his would-be benefactors couldn't possibly believe they had just made a deal to end this industrial operation indefinitely. No, it made more sense that operations had been suspended just to deal with the monster.

Everyone kept up with the news well enough to bank on the fact that *this* was a project the people of the planet had not opposed. Apparently there were only a few sacred sites where the Colonials had run afoul of the natives, but they were the most important and capital-intensive projects.

In dark, paranoid moments the new manager had suspected the sea monster might be some kind of trained pet, an enforcer sent to stop the sea project. Today he could put that fear to rest.

For the first time since he had taken the job, the manager truly listened to the sounds of Paradis. There were many things he hadn't noticed before, from the faraway call of birds to the gentle lapping of the sea. And then he heard the sound of a horn that the Nomen blew. He couldn't believe that such a gentle, mournful sound could summon up the sea beast. This must be why they had requested that the machines be silenced.

The wind picked up shortly after the music began. The manager assured himself that such an occurrence must be a coincidence. He could believe in

miracles so long as there was a scientific explanation, but magic was something else again.

The universe should not be a haunted house.

Having convinced himself that the fierce wind was a coincidence, he could pay attention to the next development. The water began to stir to starboard of the natives' small boat. Large bubbles the size of a man's head were quickly followed by a black tentacle snaking up as if to taunt the Gamon.

The native visages showed no fear. The new manager had enough fear for all of them, even though he was on shore watching through binoculars. Short of a Viper attack, he couldn't really imagine anything effective against the monster. Any attempt to capture it alive would be madness, even for the Gamon. Trying to tire the thing out would be the same as trying to outlast the tide itself.

But there were so many stories about the natives being in harmony with the planet that the manager could believe they would try to do the impossible. After all, they had turned down his offer of explosives.

As the writhing black mass rose above the small bobbing craft, the leader of the natives raised his right hand as if to strike the beast. In his hand was a small blue package that he threw in a high arc; it went down the gullet of the creature before the yawning target was out of reach.

How so small an object could poison a creature of such dimensions puzzled the new manager. How it could act so quickly on what must be an extremely primitive nervous system was an even better question. But whether the answers were to be found in science or magic, the Gamon performed their special miracle.

The monster trembled, stiffened and then tumbled as if a giant tree had been felled. The impact created a spray of water that nearly capsized the small craft. As the Colonials watching from shore wiped salt spray from their eyes, they witnessed another incredible sight.

The monster glided toward the beach. Although it was dead, it still looked formidable—and hungry with its open, dripping maw. The manager didn't have to run, having positioned himself at a safe distance from the start.

"Too big," he muttered to himself. "A living thing shouldn't be that big."

The leviathan came to a stop, gouging a deep trench in the shoreline. The Gamon paddled back to shore. The manager took a deep breath and joined his saviors.

This had been a day of surprises, but nothing had prepared the new manager for what came next. The three Gamon silently conferred and then one of them entered into the fetid tunnel of the monster's great maw. Only after the native spelunker began his bizarre quest did it occur to the manager—too late—to offer a flashlight.

They waited in silence, listening to water drip off the rigid tentacles of the dead monster. Finally, the Gamon returned with small metal objects in his gnarled hands.

He passed these to the manager. Glistening in the man's palm were the identity bracelets of the two Colonials previously consumed by the sea beast.

He wanted to thank the natives, but knew not the words. All he could think to do was bow.

The natives were barely out of sight when his communications officer approached the manager with unexpected news.

"You're not going to believe this, sir," he began and then had to swallow hard before finishing. "The Council announces that we are on the verge of a state of war with the native population."

"What?"

"Yes, sir. A state of war. Near verge. Something like that."

The two men watched the silhouettes of the departing Gamon as they disappeared over the hill.

The manager shook his head. "We should have fed the Council to our little pet here before our friends put it to sleep forever. Tell you what. You didn't give me the message about war status until a centon from now."

"Yes, sir."

Both men smiled.

Baltar prepared to teach his final class. At least he intended it to be his last class for a good, long time. They weren't exactly pressuring him to keep everyone's nose to the academic grindstone now that the Colonials again faced a time of crisis.

From his point of view a time of crisis was the norm.

"We won't meet again until this area is secured," he said. "We almost had to cancel this session but President Tigh assures me that today we're safe because of military maneuvers that were essential in this sector."

"Why don't we reconvene in space?" asked the gorgeous blonde student who had become his favorite.

Baltar sighed. "Perhaps we will but there are more important issues than pursuing this course of study. We all have to do our part now that

politicians have again led us into opportunities for sacrifice."

"You don't blame the *warriors*," noted a nasal-voiced student from the back who always rubbed Baltar the wrong way.

"Not this time."

Again Baltar closely scrutinized the faces of the class. He still wasn't sure which students were spies, and if they reported directly to Tigh or to Apollo. The way things had been going lately, he didn't much care. With the return of chaos there was no way of telling friend from foe on other than a daily basis.

"Let us conclude our first phase of study with questions we can carry with us as we hopefully live through the current crisis."

"Aren't you exaggerating the situation?" asked a red-haired girl whose grades were steadily improving.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," she began slowly, then dived into her point. "The natives can't really fight us. I mean, they're basically pacifists anyway, aren't they? That's how they've protested Ryis's projects. Isn't everyone making too much of the danger?"

A few groans from other students suggested to Baltar that he could be tough on the girl without losing any of his hard-won popularity with the class. Still, the girl expressed an opinion all too common among Colonials in this place and time.

"How old are you, child?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" she demanded, pouting.

"I don't mean to condescend." Baltar was surprised to hear himself sound non-judgmental. "But this is still my class so please bear with me."

"I'm eighteen." She spat out the words as if they were a curse.

"Don't be in such a rush to grow up," he surprised himself again with the words coming out of his mouth. What was happening to him? Were his students teaching him to be a softie?

"Every older person says that," the redhead complained.

"Yes, I agree. But it is a true statement for all that. As you grow older you retain the hopes and aspirations of youth as reality crushes you, wears you out, makes you sick and sad."

"Are you still suffering from the headaches?" asked the blonde student sympathetically.

"Yes," he almost whispered, "but it's not as bad today. It's not my headache talking right now." He promised himself that soon he would seek medical help, having exhausted every palliative offered by Colonial pharmacies.

For now, he would tell his students things they had never heard before. "As you age, you still feel young inside until the ailments begin. The first few physical problems you dismiss. After all, even when you're young you have ailments. But when you're young, they don't last long."

He took a deep breath. This wasn't easy for him but he had to throw his words at their eager, young faces. They had to hear it all. "As your face becomes a canvas for wrinkles, one of your minor pains gets worse instead of going away. Then gray hairs begin to infiltrate your head, or the hairs fall out. Other pains join the first one and they all take up permanent residence in the frail house of flesh and blood you used to trust as a healthy, young body.

"That's when you realize that you're getting older. And when you become sick, it takes so much longer to get well. And then your stamina

begins to go. All the vital energy of youth that you took for granted slowly drains away—but it happens slowly so you can fool yourself into believing that it's not over for you, that you still have a chance when it's already too late."

He was breathing heavily when he finished his bitter diatribe. The students were staring the way they had at the conclusion of his first class. But now there was a different quality. In the past, when he'd overwhelmed them with his personality there had been a reaction of wonder, a touch of awe combined with a touch of fear.

This time he felt an emotion coming off those young faces like a wave and he hated it. He was feeling their pity. And that was the most excruciatingly painful evidence of how old he really was on this sunny day in Paradis.

"I'm sorry," he said, sitting down heavily in his chair.

"Are you all right?" two of the students asked in unison. Several others laughed at the unintentional stereo effect.

Baltar raised a weak hand. "Don't mind me," he said. "I thought I'd be able to scare away my usual headache."

"Did it work?" asked the blonde.

"No, but I remembered some medicine today," he said, and took a pill with the glass of water on his desk.

Clearing his throat, he attempted to regain control of the situation. "I suppose that if you're going to grow older you might as well grow up, too! I've worked at that."

"Why did you want to know my age?" asked the redhead, demonstrating a lack of tact but an admirable devotion to her teacher's subject matter.

"You've spent your entire life in space on the run from the Cylons. You've lived through Chitain attacks. You've never known peace and now you're so quick to throw away something you've never had. You might worry more about the upcoming conflict if you weren't inured to constant strife."

The girl laughed with that infuriating quality of the young where they know everything because they have experienced so little. "The Gamon aren't like that. There won't be strife for long."

"When you say they aren't 'like that,' do you mean they aren't enemies?" Baltar challenged her.

"No, I mean they aren't dangerous."

The nasal voice of the annoying male student hammered home the point. "Which means we can brush them aside, Professor. It hardly counts as a war when the enemy is so weak."

Baltar remembered the day when Athena had come to him in sick bay and announced that he would be teaching a class. Of all the areas in which he might claim expertise, ethics was not among them. Now here he was confronted with the *raison d'etre* of this damned academic enterprise—and on what might be the last time he would try to reach the hearts and minds of these students.

How ironic to hear his own rationalizations echoing back to him from yahren ago, now rendered even more absurd by the situation on Paradis. It just wasn't fair. No punishment should be this poetic and perfect. He shouldn't have to hear the words of his own proud youth in this context.

"Why do we hate the Cylons?" he asked the class. There was no response. "Why do we fear Imperious Leader?" Again there was no answer. He took the silence to indicate the thinking of eager young minds that

would, in time, discern the dim outlines on the horizon that stood for good and evil.

"I was not as bad as you," he muttered to himself, still waiting for an answer to his questions.

"What was that, Professor?" asked a student in the front row who had never spoken before.

Baltar rose to his feet and moved in front of his desk. "While waiting for answers to my questions about the Cylons, I merely observed that I was never as bad as many of you."

"Bad?" echoed back at him from young throats.

"Wicked," he amplified. "Malicious. Unfair."

"Who the hell are you?" screamed a young voice, angry and full of fight. It was a young man training to be a warrior. At that moment, Baltar no longer suspected him of being a spy in the class. He'd never lose his temper like that if he were.

"I'm Baltar."

"The traitor!" the young man almost screamed, trembling with rage. "I'm glad you're old," he added. "I want to see you wither and die. I want to see the flesh fall from your bones and I'll dance on your skull."

"Shut up!" said the blonde firmly.

"Yeah," agreed one of her classmates.

Baltar held up his hand. He felt refreshed. The headache had suddenly vanished. The medicine had never worked this well before. A burst of adrenaline and a good fight were the tonic he needed.

"This young man is entitled to his opinion," said Baltar. "I encourage that here. If I can't get you to respond to my questions, I'll take the personal

abuse instead."

A short, pudgy student in the front row who rarely had a word before today seized the initiative. "No one answered you about the Cylons and Imperious Leader because the question was silly."

"Why is that?" Baltar persisted.

"Because we're all afraid of them. They are dangerous and powerful."

"In other words, they could kill us all?" said Baltar.

"Yes."

"And what did we do to inspire such enmity?"

The newly loquacious student ran out of steam just then. But others took up the challenge. "They hate us for being different," said one. "We were in the way of their plans," said another.

"Very good," pronounced Baltar.

"No, it isn't," said a sandy-haired student, a friend of the apprentice warrior. "I don't agree that we're worse than you are just because we are willing to fight the Gamon and you're not."

"At least you appreciate where I was going with my argument," said Baltar. "How are we any better than the Cylons if we brush aside the Gamon because they're different from us and in the way of our plans? The Cylons had an army. They had weapons like ours. They proved themselves invaders and conquerors before we fought back. The Gamon have done nothing to deserve what we're doing to them."

Every teacher comes to recognize the different qualities of silence. This was a thoughtful silence. At least it was until the sandy haired student launched his attack.

"That's specious reasoning coming from an admitted traitor."

"I have never admitted anything," said Baltar with a smile.

"A proven traitor, then," the young man continued. "You betrayed your own people to a powerful enemy."

"I did not feel solidarity with Colonials then. I was trying to secure advantages for Caprica."

"But your fellow Capricans were destroyed!" This came from the blonde, his usual defender.

"I know. I carry that guilt forever."

"You wanted to be the dictator of Caprica," said the nasal voice.

"It seemed the only way to keep us alive. I was wrong."

"*You* stayed alive," accused his red-haired nemesis.

"True. But that was a near thing. You'll never believe how close I came to being blasted by a Cylon pulse rifle and spaced out an airlock!"

"Good riddance," said the would-be warrior. The class was definitely taking on a chilly quality.

A petite brunette who rarely spoke was inspired to join in the fray.

"I want to say something on behalf of our teacher. He has always been honest with us and I don't think it's right the way we're treating him today. He's trying to make us see the ethical problems we face right now with the natives on Paradis. And all we do is insult him."

He hadn't expected a day like this. "Thank you. It seems as if we're about to have a war in this classroom and that is not my intention. But think on this all of you, whatever decision you make about the ongoing hostilities.

"Some of the strongest voices against fighting the Gamon emanate from the warriors. These are the same people who forced me to confront certain

shortcomings about my past."

"I'll bet," said someone but Baltar ignored the taunt.

"War has ethical rules like everything else. If you fight to liberate victims from a tyranny, that is a just war. If you fight for reasons of self-defense, that is a just war. But if you occupy a region and then pretend you're not occupying it, beware! That way lies madness...or actual evil."

The nasal voice challenged him again. "How do we tell an occupation from holding ground in a just war?"

"Simple," said Baltar. "What do you do with a civilian population after you have defeated its military?"

"Treat them fairly," suggested the blonde.

"A hard lesson to learn but the right answer if you aren't a Cylon."

The red-haired girl laughed. "What does any of this have to do with anything? The Gamon don't have a military."

"A very good point," said Baltar.

"This is ridiculous," said the would-be warrior. "Who says the Gamon have any special claim on this planet?"

"Commander Apollo," answered Baltar softly.

"It's sort of strange hearing you sound like one of the good guys," said the petite brunette.

Baltar laughed. "It seems strange to me as well."

He had silenced the young man who aspired to be under the direct orders of Apollo but the sandy haired agitator was still at it.

"If this is going to be our last class for a while, I have a question for *you* to ponder, Professor."

"Fire away," said Baltar, prepared to duck.

"Everyone knows about the mysterious object that was found when we first arrived here—the book of ancient writings that bore the seal of the original tribes. If this is truly the work of the Thirteenth Tribe, then we may have a claim to this planet that goes back many ages before the Gamon. You can tell from looking at them how strange they are. They can't possibly be descendants of human beings. So the planet is ours by rights and it is our sacred duty to take it back."

Baltar nodded. "Now, that is the belief of those who support a campaign against the natives that will soak Paradis in blood. At least you understand the deepest implications of your position and state them boldly."

"I thought the whole idea was for Ryis just to give us a permanent home," said another student. "He never talks about history and destiny or any of that stuff. It sounds like when Apollo talks about Earth."

Baltar nodded again. "Wheels within wheels," he said. "There are different motivations that bring factions together in times of war or peace. But I will conclude with this thought. If we had actually found Earth, and we were in this exact situation, I am positive of one truth. Commander Apollo would never advocate doing to Earthmen what we are doing to the Gamon. Hopefully we will meet again when the unpleasantness is over. Class dismissed."

Chapter Fifteen

Koren had given up on ever meeting a Gamon child, even though he was assured that they existed. He figured that he would have stumbled across at least one by now. He finally gave up on his personal search for one.

Except in his imagination, of course. When his foster father mentioned Baltar's nightmares around Koren one day, the boy suggested that the scary old man would sleep better at night if he did more daydreaming.

In daydreams Koren played with an imaginary native boy. He didn't do it too often. He wasn't unhappy and he wasn't particularly lonely, either. But he had an active imagination.

So here they were on a brand-new planet about to engage in senseless strife with the native population. That was all too painfully real. If Koren had a real Gamon friend his own age, he could actually talk to him.

He gave his make-believe native boy the name of Zo'hm. He imagined him taller than himself, but not unreasonably so. The lad still had a lot of growing to do. He also imagined that Zo'hm was very smart, which was in line with what Apollo told him about his direct involvement with leaders among the natives. Koren's real friends weren't good students, anyway, with the exception of the girl he had helped rescue from the quicksand. But the problem was that he didn't see Caran all that often. He wasn't exactly sure what to do about her.

His imaginary friend was really just a way for Koren to talk to himself and reason out problems.

Or was he? There were times when Koren could almost feel the presence of someone else with him. It only happened when he was alone in his room or out in the woods. At times like that there was a mystical quality about the voice he imagined in his head. He'd have to make himself stop, *really stop*, for the voice of Zo'hm to go away.

When Koren was having trouble with his math homework, he understood it better if he could talk out loud to his imaginary friend.

"Think about the red sun," he imagined his friend saying when he was trying to master the basic equation of $f = ma$ (force equals mass times acceleration). The test question was to answer why planets closer to the sun orbit it faster and planets farther away orbit it at a slower rate of speed.

Koren often overheard the scientists and his father go on and on about how surprising it was to find such an advanced biosphere in an orbit this far from a sun; and how there was no other solar system like this in all their adventures.

For the Galacticans, $f = ma$ meant that the closer one came to a celestial body, the more powerful the force of gravity would be. And in the case of their new sun, the closer you came to being burned by the giant furnace in the sky if you got too close.

Koren wished that same law of the universe didn't apply to relationships between different cultures, but he was afraid that it did in some strange way. It seemed that the closer the Galacticans came to other intelligent races, the more friction there was. The passion released burned everyone up instead of generating the pleasant glow of love.

Basically, Koren wanted to find an extended family in the universe instead of an endless battlefield. He didn't believe these feelings contradicted his desire to be a warrior. The Cylons were the exception to

any rational being's desire for peace. There was no choice but to fight them, at least for the foreseeable future.

But the Gamon were completely different. They shouldn't be fighting them.

He convinced himself that the biggest advantage of finding an actual Gamon peer would be that the two of them might be able to communicate on a deep level. They could get past the fear that made it so hard for adults to speak from the heart; even the brave ones, like the warriors.

Koren still remembered the barrier between him and his biological father. Jinkrat tried doing little things to make it up to his son; but when everyone is starving, all the rest of human life is reduced to unimportance or distraction.

Back then, it was perfectly natural to manufacture imaginary playmates. The fact that Koren hadn't done that in several yahren was a gentle reminder to anyone paying attention that the lad was returning to an earlier mode of behavior.

Because the situation was changing right here and now. Anger and impulsive action were replacing patience and contracts. Paradis was no longer a paradise.

Apollo was steaming after his meeting with Tigh. If someone as intelligent and sane as the president didn't see the need to keep faith with the Gamon, then there wasn't any hope.

The idea that all their struggle might come to this made him sick to his stomach. There was no reason for people to treat each other like this. There was plenty to go around on Paradis. How had such shortsighted thinking infected people Apollo respected and trusted? Or at least used to trust.

Even if the planet had limited resources, it would be terribly wrong to do this to a people that had welcomed them with open arms. In retrospect, the Gamon should have done a better job of getting across the notion that certain parts of the planet were off-limits to the Colonials. But then again, Apollo blamed himself for not dealing in a more forthright manner with the issue of a long-term visit on Paradis as opposed to permanent colonization.

In the beginning, it seemed as if his staunchest allies for not staying permanently were the scientists and their concern for how late in its final stages burned the great red lantern in the sky. Dr. Salik had recently said, "There is nothing more poignant than the death of a star."

He had been drinking heavily that night. Starbuck, who was also drinking at the same bar, had disagreed. "No, Doc—the true meaning of tragedy is when a gorgeous girl dies. Nothing else can touch that."

Apollo reflected how odd and special is the human mind that even when stressing over the largest possible issues of life and death, the personal is never far away. Memory is the culprit, never leaving you alone.

As if to prove his point, at that exact micron Cassie appeared in front of him. He hadn't seen her turn the corner. And even though there was tension in her face, he couldn't see anything but her beauty.

Her reaction to him was also silent. The expression on his face was something she hadn't seen in years. She had forgotten what it was like to see her beauty reflected back at her in the face of a man who had loved her once so intensely, whatever their feelings were for each other in the current circumstances.

Since delivering her baby, the youthful girl who could mystify any healthy male had returned with a freshness and a glow about her. Her natural perfume made him dizzy with desire. And in one of those moments

that seem forever frozen in the eye of the beholder, he drank in every detail of her features as if he were seeing her for the first time.

She had such delicate features. They could have been painted on a fine, porcelain doll. Everything about her neck and head was flawless. She had the bearing of a princess; she had the same beauty and poise now that she'd ever had before.

Even her eyebrows were perfect; while the thin, pert nose was a work of art as marvelous as her chin and as sublime as her high but not severe cheekbones. But in this special moment all he could do was stare at her rose-petal mouth and her even, white teeth.

When his gaze drifted from her sparkling eyes, the spell was broken for her and she started talking. But he was still deeply immersed in the soft embrace of his memories of her and didn't actually listen to the words.

Then the spell was broken for him as well.

"Apollo!" He heard that right enough. "What are we going to do?"

The words almost seemed to connect up with the million worries swirling around inside his head. That was indeed a good question. What could be done about the political situation unraveling and threatening everyone with new flavors of doom?

He blinked his eyes and it could have been a switch being thrown to jumpstart his brain. Gradually the truth dawned. She wasn't addressing the cosmic issues confronting Paradis. This had to be personal.

Then a grim spectre in the back of his head seemed to reach forward and force a smile on his lips that he felt lacked his normal sincerity. It seemed to suggest that if what he suspected about her baby turned out to be true, then even the personal between them carried cosmic implications.

Some days it didn't pay to get out of bed. And some nights it didn't pay to get into bed.

"The baby?" he asked.

"The baby," she declared.

He sighed. "I only have a moment."

"I accept that," she replied, "but that's all I need."

He took her by the arm and led her to a small room off the main hall. With one light and one sofa the room seemed ideal for an intimate conversation.

"Are you going to pull a Starbuck?" she asked, as the door whispered shut.

"What do you mean?" he asked as a delaying tactic.

"Are you going to abandon me and our baby?"

It never ceased to amaze him how women had the almost uncanny power of uniting men when there was any degree of genuine friendship. Apollo had talked himself blue in the face trying to make Starbuck straighten up and fly right, both figuratively and literally. But he couldn't let Cassie go unchallenged when she said such unfair things about his friend.

Feeling as if he would forever be in a surrealistic *menage-a-trois*, he defended his comrade against the woman they both loved and who loved both of them.

"Starbuck never abandoned you," he said. "You must admit the truth to yourself that he never fully committed to you in the first place. He's not capable of that, at least not yet, and you knew that going in!"

"That's not the point!" she shouted. "I'm asking you, now. You! I want to know the truth. Are you going to be sealed to me, and accept

responsibility for being father to your biological child?"

He hadn't expected this degree of bluntness. The resolve and strength in her voice demanded a reply—more than that, her stunning performance deserved a thoughtful and honest response.

What to do? He couldn't tell her his suspicions. It would be cruel and unusual punishment, even if he had the proof. There was no way he could tell her everything now, but he had to be as honest as possible with what he did say. She deserved that from him and he intended to deliver.

"The baby is very special to both of us," he said. "But there are aspects to this situation that you don't understand. The situation is more complicated than you imagine. I need time to think about this before I give you my answer."

She didn't want to hear that, but she didn't pull away when he took her hand and continued. "Please believe me, Cassie. I truly care about you, more than I have cared about anyone since Serena."

She gave a slightly sneering laugh. She had spent centons getting in the mood for this confrontation and she didn't want to leave empty-handed, even if she carried the tactile memory of his warm, large hands holding hers.

She had always loved the feel and touch of his hands.

"Are you in love with me, Apollo?" she asked simply and softly. "I need to know."

He hesitated for only a moment and then said, "When I'm ready, I'll give you an answer."

She wasn't at all happy about this turn of events. But he still had the same power over her he always did. She wanted to believe.

"I'll be waiting," she said, already wishing she could take a stronger stand. "I'm not a fool, Apollo. I can imagine what it must be like for you now. Our problems might not seem to add up to much, compared to the fate of a whole planet and all the Colonials."

"Thank you," he said, giving her arm a squeeze and leaning forward to kiss her cheek. He pulled back, comfortable in the knowledge that his smile was as natural as the feelings he had for her.

She felt better, too. Her smile stayed with him as he walked down the corridor on his way to face stern duties.

Cassie had come a long way from the days of being a socialator.

She had walked with her head held high even then. Now she had even more reason as she walked back to where her baby was waiting.

That was the first thing Gar'Tokk noticed about him was that the Gamon child had old eyes. The youngster took the Borellian Noman by the hand and led him into the village.

Gar'Tokk remembered that Koren had been lamenting his inability to find Native children. He would make a point of telling the lad about this when next he saw him.

He paused and looked over his shoulder. This village was the nearest to New Caprica City. The gleaming spires in the distance seemed a reproach now that the killing had begun.

The elder of this village could be a much older twin of Yarto, the one who had done so much to negotiate in good faith with Apollo. But this one was missing an eye. With all his experience of battle, the Noman was surprised to see a wound of this severity on one of the natives. He had seen them either whole and alive or dead from the weapons of the Colonials.

The Noman and the Gamon came close but did not touch. They both squatted on the ground and remained in that position for a span of time. The thoughts of the elder slowly brushed against the mind of the visitor. They felt something like a cool mist brushing against the furrowed brow of the Noman before seeping inside the large cranium.

There was nothing personal or individual about this contact. It began as a general sense of well being. Then there was something more. Much more.

Gar'Tokk had his first inkling of the in-between places. Wherever this elder sat was a focal point. Even though they were not inside a dream hut—restricted to the most accomplished of the Gamon—Gar'Tokk sensed shadows from such a gathering. He could almost perceive the blue mist that filled the chamber when contact between worlds was strongest.

From his own background, he had a belief in the oneness and the harmony of life. This did not mean there was no death, but rather that death, as everything else, had its proper place and time to maintain harmony.

Now the sense of well-being shifted. There was wrongful death in Paradis and it was the fault of the Colonials. Without a single word exchanged between them, Gar'Tokk was asked how he could be part of such a discontinuity in the life stream. It was like being lectured by a stern parent. Gar'Tokk was supposed to know better.

Before true communication could begin, Gar'Tokk had to look deep inside himself and find an answer to the very question he spent so much of his life avoiding. There was no time to put it off any longer. Only by acknowledging his true feelings could he engage in fruitful dialogue.

Gar'Tokk did not feel genuine sympathy for the Colonials as a whole. But he did empathize with individual Colonials who had won his respect. In

contrast, he felt a connectedness to all the Gamon and this suggested to the elder an affinity with the higher consciousness of the Gamon.

Gar'Tokk also let himself embrace the pain of loss that so few of his people were left and there were no women in the diminishing band. He also shared with the elder his feelings of ambivalence as he found himself so often in an undesirable place between his fellow Nomen and the Colonials.

All this was spiritual food to the questing soul of the Gamon elder. The old man nodded both with his mind and his head. Truly, Gar'Tokk was the proper choice for this encounter.

Then they talked about the problems besetting Paradis without ever uttering a word.

When the initial contact was broken, Gar'Tokk was more exhausted than he had been since the last time he'd fought in battle. The difference was that this was a pleasant tiredness, suspending the body and mind in a kind of limbo where one felt that if no extra exertion were made one could stay awake forever.

As Gar'Tokk rose to his feet, he saw that he had company. Commander Apollo had arrived, brought by the same child into the circle of the meeting.

"You are finally here," Gar'Tokk grunted, adjusting back to the uncomfortable practice of speaking with mouth and tongue.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I had matters to attend to. May I ask what you were doing just now?"

Gar'Tokk tilted his head, an unusually expressive gesture for him. "I was communicating with the elder."

"But you weren't speaking," said Apollo.

"This level of telepathic communication is new for me. Mind to mind speaking is an ancient ability that my people rarely use any longer, but the Gamon are well versed in these abilities."

"This is not the first time you have used telepathy here."

"No, but never in my life have I experienced anything quite like this."

Apollo nodded. "Then we may accomplish something today. Does the elder desire communication with me?"

Both Gar'Tokk and Apollo received the same mental force of an affirmative answer. All the long evenings the commander had sought his inner light made a difference in this situation. The alien communication came into his head along with a subtle compliment, a bit of surprise that this human being could hear at all.

Gar'Tokk was asked to speak for the Gamon, even as the strength of the telepathic communication increased in Apollo's mind. "The Gamon are concerned, my friend," Gar'Tokk said, "that the Colonials have never asked permission to establish a full colony of this planet. That was not the bargain you first struck with Yarto and the other representatives of Paradis."

"I know," said Apollo. There was a buzzing in his head as the telepathic messages tried to break through.

"More serious is the killing of Gamon by Ryis's men at New Caprica City. There was no provocation."

"There is no excuse for it," Apollo agreed.

Suddenly the buzzing in his head resolved into identifiable words. They felt like bursts of cool air soothing his mind. They were a cure for a pain he hadn't even noticed that he had. Maybe this was the cure for headaches that Baltar sought so desperately.

But the content of the words was not soothing:

Your people are rude and without any manners.

"Please accept my apologies," was all that Apollo could think to say at the moment. "We have wronged all of you and are willing to take whatever measures you feel are necessary for our people to stay."

You say this when many of your leaders declare war against us.

"It's not too late to reverse this swift march toward disaster. We have been struggling to survive in space for too long, obsessed with our own concerns and challenges. We have forgotten how to treat other civilizations with respect. What measures can we take to rectify the situation, other than pulling back the engines of war?"

Although the elder only had but one good eye, it was lustrous black and seemed to see through everyone and everything. Again his telepathic words struck home in Apollo's brain.

The killings have made the situation more serious. The threats of your Council promise worse to come. At this point, nothing will suffice but that you cease building New Caprica City. You must return to completing the reconstruction and repair of your fleet as soon as possible. You may stay only as long as required to complete the task. Then you and your people must leave. The last time a culture such as yours visited our world we made the mistake of inviting them to stay. The result was horror that cannot be forgotten and never forgiven.

There was so much to take in that Apollo couldn't respond for a long, silent moment. He heard the heavy breathing of Gar'Tokk to his right and that detail of normal life helped him concentrate on the matter at hand.

"May I ask what culture came before? If we knew, it might help with reorienting my people for the task ahead."

Was that a hint of a smile he saw around the corners of the elder's mouth?

You are a good representative of your people, but most of your race is very different. The Gamon will not be infected by their vices, Apollo. Your people's contempt for this planet is unacceptable. Their technology and culture cannot be allowed here, except temporarily. Our discussion is at an end.

"What if the Colonials refuse to leave?" Apollo asked. It seemed like a reasonable question. The answer was unexpected.

You will have no choice.

The complete absence of fear emanating from the elder was disconcerting. Didn't he realize that the very technology he decried assured the victory of the Colonials if diplomacy failed?

Then the old man did an even more surprising thing. He walked over to Gar'Tokk and placed a withered hand on the Noman's heart. This was one time when Gar'Tokk did not mind being touched.

The elder repeated the action with Apollo, then slowly and silently moved back into the village.

The two friends left. For a long time they could not think of anything to say. Apollo broke the silence at last.

"Did you notice there was a child there?"

"Yes," said Gar'Tokk.

"I'll tell Koren about that."

"A good idea."

More silence. Then Gar'Tokk said, "As we left, the elder sent me a last telepathic message."

"If it's private, perhaps I shouldn't hear it," suggested Apollo.

"It is for you, but I was asked to be the bearer. He told me that when your race matures, you may find the Gamon again one day."

"An odd thing to say when we haven't even left this planet yet. I'm still trying to understand what he meant when he said that we have no choice about leaving Paradis."

Gar'Tokk stroked his beard thoughtfully. "My advice is that you trust your spirit to guide you."

Apollo shrugged. "May the Lords of Kobol guide us all."

Chapter Sixteen

Deep under the surface of Paradis, a handful of humans and their Gamon guide continued to explore a new world. Natural light from the walls of a gigantic cavern poured down on their weary heads. For those with the curiosity to look up, gigantic designs were visible on the roof of the enormous cavern that no human or native could have possibly placed there.

For those ready to study mysteries closer to home, the ruins surrounding the small band of adventurers provided a lifetime's study. What happened to devastate such a great metropolis? How had the skeletal remains ended up here?

But for Troy none of these mysteries mattered at the moment. The quest he wished to undertake required the latitude and longitude of one person. Rhaya was missing.

"Where the hell is she?" he demanded of his companions. "Doesn't she have the sense not to go wandering off alone in a place like this?"

"What kind of place is this, exactly?" Dalton asked quite reasonably.

"We don't know," replied Troy. "That's why she shouldn't wander off."

"Look, Troy, she wasn't tired so she decided to look around," said Sheba "Rhaya said if she wasn't back by a certain time to send our Gamon guide after her, which we've done."

"If I'd been awake, I would have said something," Dalton said, chagrined. "We've had a slight breakdown of military protocol."

"The same as always," Troy half muttered to himself. Then he got himself back on track. "Well, as long as we're here let's do more exploring ourselves."

The plan was simple. Sheba, Troy, Trays and Dalton all went off from the same point in four different directions. The acoustics in the cavern were remarkable. Anyone finding something really interesting need only shout and the others would follow the sound of his or her voice. Otherwise, they would reconverge on the same spot within two centons.

Troy left a note for Rhaya in case she returned to base camp first.

The ruins extended in all directions as far as the eye could see. No one found a single shred of remains from the original inhabitants. No one found remnants of machines, although the dimensions of the city suggested the denizens must have enjoyed an advanced technology.

They marveled that such destruction could lie below such a radiantly beautiful planet. Dalton wondered if there might be greater mysteries lying even deeper.

They returned empty-handed except for Sheba, who was carrying a broken statue. There was enough left of it to show a graceful line or two suggesting flight and motion. It cheered them to see it.

They were less cheered to see the Gamon guide return without Rhaya. The Gamon communicated with Sheba as she had done before.

"She says that her people want always to remember the horror, so they leave these ruins in peace."

"Don't you mean in pieces?" asked Trays, laughing alone at his think joke.

"I don't see how they could do anything about these ruins even if they wanted to," said Dalton.

"Does she know where Rhaya went?" asked Trays.

"It appears not," said Sheba. "She says that she's not familiar with these particular tunnels and that it's very easy to get lost down here. She says that her people have never been permitted to enter these areas for thousands of yahren."

"So our girl has gotten herself lost," said Troy. "Great, just great! We've got to find her. Meanwhile let's ask our guide if she can get us back to our people on the other side of the planet."

Sheba nodded. "Give us a moment," she said.

The guide shut her eyes for a moment and then smiled, informing them that everything was taken care of. This did not exactly satisfy Trays.

"What does *that* mean?" he asked with great exasperation.

Sheba had an answer. "She has communicated with Gamon on the other side of the planet and they have informed our people of our location."

"Do you believe that?" asked Dalton.

"I want to."

"How is it possible?" Dalton persisted in doubt.

Sheba amplified her position. "The Gamon are all in direct communication with each other, so there is never a problem getting anything they need, or knowing anything that is going on anywhere on the planet."

"Astounding," said Troy.

Sheba continued. "All the various tribes of Gamon are linked mentally, so there is never a problem with language—which was a major issue in earlier times."

"Wait a minute," said Troy. "I have a problem with this idea. What about the Gamon who chased us in the tunnels? They intended to do us grievous bodily harm. Did someone forget to give them the message that we aren't enemies?"

"There have been unfortunate developments since we've been away," said Dalton.

No one liked thinking about that, but Sheba replied to the challenge from Troy. "There are a few offshoots of the Gamon culture that are still fairly primitive. With our usual excellent luck, we managed to find a pocket of them."

"Go team," said Trays.

Dalton put things into perspective. "On the other hand, we wouldn't have discovered evidence of this lost civilization if we hadn't come here."

"These primitive Gamon are not supposed to have weapons," Sheba continued. "But as remains true of all the natives, their most dangerous weapon lies in mental powers. We are only now coming to realize how dangerous that can be."

"Our Vipers," said Troy. "I can hardly believe it. Our Vipers!"

Sheba took a deep breath. "It's true. They mentally caused our ships to lose power because they had never seen technology such as ours."

With a new sense of respect tinged with wonder, the Colonials regarded the old Gamon who seemed so much like an elderly woman. What sort of powers could she bring to bear against them? Instead, she chose to help them.

"She didn't want to take any chances," Sheba continued. "She didn't want the primitive Gamon to injure you or imprison you in order to study you."

"Sounds like they might as easily be described as mentally ill Gamon as savages," said Troy. "Whatever the problem is with them, we owe a lot to our benefactor."

They all agreed, appreciating yet again the gift of safety, however temporary, that the native had provided at risk to herself. But safety was becoming the greatest illusion of Paradis.

As if underlining the point, they began hearing screams from a direction they had not explored when they spread out. The acoustics in the giant cavern were indeed remarkable.

"Let's go!" shouted Troy and they started heading off in the direction of Rhaya's voice.

"Wait," said Sheba. "Wouldn't it be better if only Troy and the Gamon went while the rest of us secure the base camp?"

"No," said almost everyone in unison.

"I didn't think so," replied Sheba with a grin, "but you can't blame a girl for trying to follow standard operating procedure once in a while."

"You're forgiven," said Troy, shouldering his weapon.

They ran at a steady clip. "I hope she screams some more," said Troy. "It will help us locate her!"

"I hope she can," Trays thought out loud. No telepathy was needed for all of them to read each other's minds. They were worried sick.

Rhaya couldn't be on this level of the cavern or they would have found her when they spread out. So they started checking out side-tunnel openings, praying for the sound of her voice again. She didn't disappoint them.

"Here!" said Sheba as Rhaya let loose with another yelp. The cave was dark and they hated to leave the light behind, but when they reached the end they were treated to another display of underground luminescence.

It was good to have light; good to see that Rhaya was not in immediate danger but had caught her leg between some rocks. It was also good to see that despite her accident-prone behavior of late she had made the most important discovery yet.

Looming over their heads were the remains of a giant space ship. It must have crashlanded long ago, but its hull was still largely intact.

"Amazing," breathed Dalton even as she helped extract Rhaya's leg from the stalagmites that held it. "How did you ever find this?"

"My curiosity knows no bounds," she said, wincing as her leg was freed.

"Can you walk?" Dalton asked as the younger woman leaned on her.

"Yes," she said. "You're not keeping me out of my ship."

"Yours?" asked Trays with a grin.

"Finders keepers," she answered with a wink.

Troy took the lead. Gaping holes in the hull let in the cavern's light but a remnant of artificial illumination remained in the vast white corridors of this obvious product of a technology in advance of the fleet's battlestars.

The doors were all open, a propitious development as none of them was sure if they could have pried them open without power. Troy went first into the largest compartment of the ship and then reappeared at the door, his face a mask of sadness.

"What's wrong?" asked Dalton.

"Thousands of them," he gasped and pointed the way. He couldn't say it. They had to see for themselves.

Stretched out along wall upon wall were thousands of preservation pods with human remains in them. The emptiness of the deserted city was already a pleasant memory.

There were just too many bodies. Even a hardened warrior could be set back on his heels stumbling onto a sight like this.

"I think that I understand," Troy finally said.

"What is this?" asked Rhaya, starting to come out her trance as well.

"By the Lords of Kobol, this ship appears to be one of the city-sized space arks that the Thirteenth Tribe was rumored to have used for transport of our people so very long ago. I didn't really believe that it existed...until now."

"I know what you mean," whispered Dalton.

"I mean, we've been told about this since we were kids," said Troy. "We all heard the stories in school. As we grew up we started reading more cynical historians, right? They assured us that the Thirteenth Tribe was a legend at best but almost certainly a myth."

"Welcome to reality," said Dalton, stretching out her hand and touching the mythical past made incredibly real.

"Now more than ever, we have to get back to the surface," announced Troy. "We have to be found and picked up. It's our duty to report this."

"Do you think the Gamon truly possess telepathic powers that can reach anywhere?" asked Dalton.

"I do," answered Sheba.

Dalton grinned. "Then we could use them as a means of communication anywhere on the planet. Maybe the guide could get a message to Yarto. I assume that he still has good feelings for Apollo and that some of it might rub off on his friends."

Everyone agreed that it was worth a try. It turned out to be the best idea any of them had had in along time.

The journey back to the surface took a while and the guide was encouraged to periodically send out messages. Once they reached the surface, it wasn't all that long before Starbuck and Boomer swooped down in their fiery chariots to reclaim their fellow warriors. Dalton had never been happier to see her father.

At times like this, I can see why Starbuck is so appealing to the ladies, she thought. She was proud of her father at that moment. But mostly Dalton had mixed feelings about the man who had abandoned her as a child, only to reenter her life when she was an adult, on her own, and no longer in need of him. Or so she had thought. Now that he was part of her life she understood where much of her own inner strength came from. He could be a scoundrel, but also a hero. Her father was a hard man to hate.

And it was a pure thrill to see Vipers not konk out this time! Maybe that was something else for which they owed thanks to the old native woman. The Gamon had selected the coordinates for their rescue.

"We've got to solve the mystery of this planet's magnetic disturbances," said Troy. "I think our scientists have been falling down on the job."

When Starbuck asked what had happened, he was initially greeted with a deafening silence. So much had transpired that it was difficult to know where to begin.

Sheba gave it her best shot. "Well, we decided to take a little detour and check out the planet up close."

Starbuck's response was in character. "Well, maybe over some ambrosa tonight you'll tell me about it."

Much to Dalton's delight, Sheba let him have it right between the eyes. "You won't get anything out of me, Starbuck. I'm not one of your minions. I'm too smart for you."

Boomer cracked up at that. They were all enjoying the relief of being reunited and out of danger. Starbuck and Sheba put on a show for everyone.

Then it was time to get serious. How do you tell a friend that the fairy tales he outgrew when he was a teenager have suddenly turned out to be true?

Sheba shifted the conversation with expertise. "Starbuck, Boomer, we found something deep inside the planet that's going to surprise a lot of people."

"A diamond mine?" Starbuck asked with his boyish grin.

Troy got into the act. "You'll never believe this, but I think we've located a Thirteenth Tribe space ark that must have crashed on this planet thousands of yahren ago."

Boomer whistled. "Then someone had better stay behind. I volunteer, if we can get the Gamon to stay with me and act as guide."

Starbuck gave the thumbs up and the others began boarding the Vipers. The Gamon woman waved goodbye, a mannerism she'd picked up from her Colonial friends.

Sheba thanked the native. "We appreciate your help more than we can express. We apologize for our rudeness that we never asked your name."

"Cali," the old woman spoke to her mind. Then she turned and began walking with Boomer back to the entrance to the vast cave complex.

"What a unique and interesting lady," said Sheba. "These Gamon are very mysterious. I have a funny feeling that there's a lot they're not telling us."

"Why should they?" asked Troy. "I wouldn't trust us, would you?"

As fate would have it, Dalton flew back with her father. And as usual, she struggled with her desire to idolize him and the deep wound she carried because of him. No matter how playful they were on the surface, the emotions ran deep.

"Are you okay? What happened to you?" Starbuck asked.

Dalton said, "Troy can be a little rough sometimes, you know, when we make love. Of course, I always leave him out of breath, but I know I like it."

"Uh-huh," was all that a suddenly uncomfortable Starbuck could muster.

Then he laughed and ignited his thrusters, full power, and took off so fast that Dalton was the one who was out of breath. As if that wasn't enough, he lit up one of his stinky cigars.

"Dad!"

Starbuck said, "You got a problem?"

"Oh, not at all," said Dalton, recovering. "I had more than enough air to breathe while we were burrowing underground like moles. I'm giving up air for a while because I think you can get spoiled by too much of a good thing."

"So...do you want one, or not?"

Dalton laughed. "You know what I say, if you can't beat um, join um! You got a spare?"

Before he could come up with a clever retort, Dalton grabbed his last cigar and lit up. "When it comes to these stink-ropes it's better to smoke your own than breathe someone else's," she said.

"A chip off the old block."

"More than you'll ever know."

Starbuck changed the mood. "What really happened to you down there?"

"Do you want me to lie?"

"Lie? Where did you get all your bad habits, young lady?"

"Why, everything I needed to know I learned from you, Father!"

Starbuck decided to get serious about the flying. She could tell from the way he clenched the cigar between his teeth. There was also his body language and the way he grabbed the navi-hilt. But most of all, it's what he broadcast to the other pilots.

"Come on guys, let's get our butts out of here!"

Dalton smiled and puffed contentedly.

On the way back from the rescue mission, Starbuck and Boomer were notified of another major incident with the Gamon at New Caprica City. After dropping off Dalton and Rhaya at the med labs, they wasted no time hurrying back down to the planet.

The trouble didn't wait for their arrival.

The foreman of the construction crew didn't want to take point on a military exercise; he just wanted to do his job. He'd managed to avoid getting involved on the previous incident that had led the slaughter of

natives. He's counted himself fortunate that day he'd missed out on the bloodshed. Now he was afraid that his luck had run out.

The Gamon slowly moved down the road, kicking up small clouds of dust. The unnerving thing about watching their approach was that they were so deliberate and almost relaxed about what they were doing.

Firing a warning shot didn't do a damned thing. They were unfazed. All the foreman knew was that he hadn't given an order for anyone to fire anything. The situation was already getting out of hand and it had hardly begun yet.

"What are we going to do?" asked the man closest to him.

"Why ask me?" the foreman answered in disgust. "I didn't give the order for any weapons to be used."

"When will you?" the man wanted to know, his hand shaking so badly that the foreman did not feel comfortable about the worker holding a weapon at all.

"I don't think I'm going to have to do anything," the foreman said. "These men are all fired up. I can't stop them, no matter what I say or do. But give me that microphone. Maybe the loudspeaker system we rigged up can save some lives. It's worth a try!"

As they had in the past, the Gamon threatened no violence but they intended for their form of gentle force to prevent any further work on the city. The men with the weapons didn't seem to care that those approaching were unarmed. The attitude of the natives was a kind of weapon in itself.

Workers didn't want to be told that what they did was immoral. They broke their backs and sweated over thankless tasks for pay, but the very discomfort lent the enterprise a kind of dignity. The most hateful thing about the Gamon protest was that it robbed the workers of their pride.

They hated the natives for that. Some of them had already killed and now more of them were ready to kill again.

Through the loudspeaker boomed the voice of the foreman. He wasn't sure that any of his words were understood but if the rumors he kept hearing about the Gamon were true, then they would pick up on the underlying meaning of his words. The issues were plain to both sides.

"Halt!" he shouted into the microphone and his voice thundered over the crowd on both sides of the great divide. "You are not supposed to be here. This is your last warning. If you don't turn back, we will open fire."

A nervous marksman fired and one of the natives fell. A few other guns barked and the same result ensued. But the mass of Gamon kept coming.

"Damn it! Stop that!" screamed the foreman.

His problems were only beginning. Every Colonial knew the sound of Viper engines. Suddenly, the sky was no longer friendly. For one crazed moment, the foreman imagined that the Vipers might start strafing everyone, Gamon and workers alike. But instead the craft landed—to his great relief—and the pilots approached on foot.

The foreman wondered what he had ever done to deserve this. Then he cursed himself for taking the job from Ryis in the first place. The Viper pilots were creme of the crop and that just put more pressure on the foreman.

He recognized them all—Starbuck, Boomer, Trays, Sheba. Any one of them could lay waste to six of his men without breaking a sweat. And he knew they were on the other side even before they opened their mouths. This was not turning out to be a good day.

"We mean to stop this bloodbath before it starts," said Starbuck, his tone of voice suggesting that the foreman was responsible in some way. The

poor bastard was about ready to turn in his resignation when matters took another turn into even greater complications.

The civilian government's new city police force arrived in the finest vehicles that had yet been strip-mined from the hulls of old fleet spaceships. The city police captain ran over to confront Starbuck. The foreman heaved a sigh of relief that so far the warriors and the cops weren't brandishing their guns yet. He had a pretty fair idea that they were better at hitting their targets than the angry workers who were disinclined to fire again until the mess was settled between every kind of boss they had ever known.

The foreman noticed that the steady advance of the .Gamon had finally slowed. Perhaps they were also interested to see the outcome in this conflict between the human authorities.

The police captain started the ball rolling by asking, "What's going on here?"

It was now the foreman's turn. "The Gamon are preventing us from starting new construction on the city. It's the same as the other times. Somehow they managed to shut down our equipment and none of us has figured out how to counter it."

Boomer interjected at this point. "Who gave the order to fire on them?"

The foreman was becoming more frantic and hostile. "Listen, I don't know why you're making this your business, but let me tell you that we've got a job to do. We've been given strict orders not to let anyone or anything stand in our way. Now, we've asked the Gamon to back off. We've been polite, see? But they refuse. If these primitives don't get the message, we're going to force them out of the way."

Now the police captain dived back into the maelstrom. "That's *our* job."

"Over our dead bodies," said Sheba, reconfirming the foreman's suspicion that this was going to be an interesting day. He hated interesting days.

"If anyone hurts one more Gamon," she continued, "I'm going to hurt him back!"

Normally the foreman took threats seriously, especially from warriors. He had no doubt that she could do a serious lot of damage before being put down. But he never would have gotten this job if he couldn't do basic arithmetic, and the numbers just weren't on the side of the warriors.

"You're outnumbered," said the foreman, "ridiculously outnumbered. You don't stand a chance."

Starbuck grinned. The foreman really hated that. Then the most famous Viper warrior said, "We'll just have to see about that."

The foreman noticed something new in the police captain. There was fear in the man's eyes. This did not bode well.

Then things got really interesting. "Men, take out your guns and point them at that warrior!"

They did. Starbuck tried to remember the last time he had that many guns trained on him. Off the top of his head, he couldn't quite remember.

Out of the side of his mouth, he said to Boomer, "You know, old pal, this could get out of hand."

Chapter Seventeen

Baltar didn't much care for Dr. Wilker's bedside manner. He hated going to the doctor. But there was no way he could receive help if he didn't admit his problem.

"Sounds like your headaches are psychosomatic," said the physician whom Baltar seriously doubted could heal himself.

"Why do you say that?" asked Baltar.

"Because you admit that the headaches have a link to your nightmares."

In situations like this, Baltar could not keep from being snide. "Has it occurred to you that a physical condition is causing the nightmares instead of the other way around?"

"No," said the doctor. The man was infuriating.

It was one thing to confide in Apollo about his dreams, and quite another to spill his guts to this man. Apollo was open to the possibility that there was some kind of link between Baltar and the Cylons. Baltar had convinced himself that his dreams meant something.

He wasn't about to tell Wilker his latest fever dream. He even hesitated to share this one with Apollo.

Unlike all the rest, this one had begun on Paradis. At first, Baltar let himself believe that he was finally free of the night terrors. The dream was even pleasant at first. Baltar was recognizing in the sleeping state something that his waking mind tended to deny.

Paradis was an incredibly beautiful world. The mountains, the lakes, the fields, the forests, the sea—they did offer something not to be found in the interstellar void. For all his sarcasm and assumed superiority, Baltar was forming an attachment to the new world. He was starting to relax in spite of himself.

He didn't have the planetary dream down below but only when he was back in his quarters in the comfort of a safe orbit. The dream was soft and fuzzy, warm and friendly, blissfully unaware of the growing tensions between the Gamon and the Colonials. It was a vision of what Paradis could be, with all the humanoid forms joining in a great dance, a festival of life.

Naturally it didn't last. The sky of Paradis grew dark. Baltar found himself pulling back from the happy crowd. The hairs on the back of his head tingled. Something was wrong and he didn't want to be too close to the crowd.

No sooner did he put himself at a safe distance than Colonials and Gamon fell to the ground and writhed in agony. They maintained their same positions from the dance only now they performed their respective ballets in the dirt.

The spectacle would have been no more than ludicrous if it stopped there. But nightmares never know when to stop.

The Gamon began to transform—at first by growing scales. They had always struck Baltar as a handsome people but not now as the scales spread and their eyes glowed yellow, and their hands trembled themselves into claws.

For relief, Baltar gazed upon his fellow humans. No relief was to be found there. Men, women and children grew rigid as something dark began to spread across their flesh. Small bits of metal spread like an army of

diligent insects until every human form was completely covered in a metal sheen.

The Colonial eyes weren't yellow. They were red as blood.

As Baltar sat in Wilker's office, he was disinclined to share with the medical man the grotesque details of this latest journey into realms of darkness. He wasn't about to get into a philosophical discussion of the meanings he suspected lay behind the horrific images.

Baltar had no intention of sharing the details of this latest nightmare with anyone! The symbolism sank him into a pit of metaphysical dread. Clearly, the Gamon represented the reptilian, organic Cylons, while the humans transforming into a new breed of cyborgs must represent the constant threat of the robotic enemy in its most terrifying aspect of the Centurions.

No, Baltar concluded, a doctor didn't need to hear any of this to prescribe a more powerful drug than a former member of the Council of Twelve could track down on his own.

While Baltar wrestled with his personal problem, the doctor solved it for him.

"You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to," said Wilker. "I'll give a stronger medication than you've been using."

Baltar brightened at the news but only for a moment. The doctor wasn't through with him.

"I have to tell you what I think, Baltar. I believe your condition is psychosomatic. You obviously disagree. But even if there is a deeper cause, I still don't believe you'll find relief through medication. You can come back and see me when the pills I give you today are no longer effective."

As Baltar returned to his quarters, he had to admit that the doctor had a point. If the Cylons were using him as a kind of receiving set, then there seemed no way to medicate himself out of it. What he didn't want to stress to the doctor was his belief that if he could drug himself heavily enough he'd pass into a state of blissful unconsciousness where no dream could possibly find him.

That seemed his only hope for a good night's sleep, something he had not experienced for a long time. He was so sleep deprived that nothing else mattered to him now, not even with Paradis coming apart all around them.

Baltar always had a sense of priorities.

It was good to be back aboard the *Galactica*. Whatever he did and wherever he went, Apollo would always think of his ship as home.

His communicator crackled to life and he heard Starbuck sounding uncharacteristically stressed. "We've got a situation here," reported Starbuck.

"Read you, old buddy. I'm about to attend a meeting with the Council. Fill me in."

Starbuck filled him in, not leaving out the details of the various weapons currently pointed in his direction. Apollo shook his head in consternation.

"Don't do anything at the moment," said the commander. "I don't want them shooting you!"

"That makes two of us," agreed his old friend with a deep sincerity.

"I'll try to buy you a little time at the Council."

Starbuck was not impressed. "A little time is going to be expensive, old buddy!"

"Don't get yourself killed, Starbuck. You owe me for all the times I've saved your ass!"

Starbuck took the bait. "Who saved whose ass? And as long as we're on the subject, who got whom into all those life-threatening situations in the first place?"

Apollo laughed. "Yeah, who turned whom into the fleet's greatest hero?"

Starbuck groaned. "You got me! All right, I admit I'm a lazy and reluctant hero!"

"Don't make me throw up my mushies. I've got a job to do in that Council meeting. Let's wish each other luck. Meanwhile, defuse the situation as best you can. See if you can't get everyone to stand down."

"You got it. May the Lords of Kobol be with of us."

Apollo switched off, took a deep breath and headed into real enemy territory. He had to get a concession this time. He had to make those diehard bureaucrats see reason. The danger that Starbuck and his friends faced at this exact moment only made the stakes all the more urgent.

The first person he noticed was Sire Opis. The man's face seemed to be made of old parchment with wrinkles upon wrinkles. Everyone knew that he has was the defacto patron of Ryis and all the architect's works. Apollo had been fighting him every time he argued with the architect. The time had come to face powers and principalities with no intermediary.

Before launching into diplomacy—which Adama had once referred to as war by another name—Apollo wondered why those sworn to represent the people should be so blatant about serving their personal agendas instead.

The words of the Gamon elder echoed in his mind. And he had to admit that the human race had a long way to go before it would be ready for the peace everyone claimed to seek and always felt their due.

Tigh made a great show of welcoming Apollo. There was no one in that chamber who desired a compromise more than the president. Of that one fact Apollo was certain.

They took their seats around the long table, and Tigh laid out the agenda to be discussed among the assembled dignitaries.

News that the Gamon natives were massing around New Caprica City had already circulated among the Council. Any hopes Apollo might have that such intelligence might shift some of the members to a more reasonable position were soon dashed. He could feel the mood of the room, something his father had labored hard to teach him.

The Council had already made their decision about whether to stay or continue the epic trek across the universe. Apollo had the unenviable task of trying to shift men who didn't want to budge. It was hard enough making a case to people who were genuinely neutral. Today the commander of the fleet had his work cut out for him.

Sire Opis, despite his age, had only recently been elected to the Council and still wore the robes of his office with a pride that old-timers found slightly amusing. Opis had proven himself a master politician many times. Ryis was an example of that.

The Council had elected Opis to speak for them before Apollo ever stepped foot into the room.

"Commander Apollo, let me begin by stating that we have given considerable thought and discussion to what I'm about to say. With that in mind, let me inform you that our scientists confirm that we are in no danger

on this planet, or anywhere in this vicinity of space. Thorough explorations of Paradis have also confirmed the presence of every mineral and energy source we need."

He cleared his throat. Apollo availed himself of the momentary pause to swallow hard and hold his tongue. Might as well hear the old bastard out.

"There is one issue of immediate concern," Sire Opis continued. "The problem seems to be from the indigenous species, the Gamon.

However, our best experts have determined that this species is mostly harmless and poses no real and lasting threat to our people. True, the natives may not appreciate our presence; but given the existing condition of the fleet and our people's absolute demand that we give up the foolhardy adventure of chasing hither and yon across space, we have decided to stay. *They* have decided to stay!"

He paused as if expecting applause, but the situation was too serious for any manifestations of joy. Opis could read a room as well as anyone present, so he picked up the thread of his thought and continued.

"We'll have a vote, of course, but we believe that to be a mere formality as the majority will never choose to venture into space again."

He smiled and looked directly at Apollo. The commander showed no expression and resisted the perfectly human impulse to incline his head in response. Apollo made himself a statue and waited for the other boot to drop.

"With that in mind, Commander," intoned Sire Opis, "what do you wish to address us about?"

Now Apollo allowed himself a natural reaction. He and Tigh exchanged knowing glances. If Tigh had the telepathic abilities of the Gamon elder, he would beaming four words into the center of Apollo's brain right now:

I told you so!

Apollo took the floor. "Honorable members of the Council, please accept my gratitude that you saw fit to receive me today as you have already struggled long and hard through your deliberations. Apparently the debate was so comprehensive that there was no need for a dissenting opinion. If the findings of the research are beyond doubt—and when have we ever been steered wrong in that department?—then what is there left for me to say? I don't doubt that the majority is exactly where you want them to be at this time. So what case can I possibly make to dissuade you from your present course? As usual, my information is based upon speculation and a gut feeling."

Sire Opis laughed but he laughed alone. Tigh interjected, "There have been occasions where we owe our lives to the instincts of Commander Apollo. Even newer members of the Council should be familiar with this history."

Sire Opis beat a hasty yet graceful retreat. "I haven't been living somewhere else in the universe these past yahren. I freely admit that Apollo has often guided us well... in the past."

Ignoring the backhanded compliment, Apollo continued: "Here is the issue that confronts us as I see it. The Gamon have requested that I inform you that although they've invited us to stay temporarily on their planet, we must leave as soon as we have repaired our ships and are spaceworthy again. They also state that we have abused our privileges and must give up our bad habits."

"Bad habits?" thundered Sire Opis. "What do they mean by that?"

"Well," said Apollo, "it would be nice if we would stop killing their people."

A few Council members had the temerity to laugh at Apollo's remark. Not everyone was in complete denial about what was happening on Paradis.

Sire Opis was not amused. "The natives have forced our hand!"

"No!" responded Apollo just as forcefully. "You're wrong. The Gamon have only defended what is rightfully theirs and they have done this without weapons."

Sire Opis bit his bottom lip, keeping certain impolitic words from escaping. When he had regained his composure, he continued.

"Apollo, I appreciate that you are a passionate man; but this is beyond the scope of any one person to decide. The people have spoken, and as their representatives we are duty bound to insure their protection and survival."

Apollo was having none of it. "Easy enough to say when you have played a crucial role in putting the Colonials into this dire situation to begin with. What kind of duty is that? And what about the Gamon? What theory of duty drives you to violate agreements to which I personally gave my word?"

Sire Opis seized at the personal remark as a hungry man might snatch a bird out of the air. "Is that what we quarrel over? Is it only because you were involved in the initial negotiations that you oppose the will of your own people?"

Apollo didn't lose sight of the argument. "Sire Opis, I would be the first to step aside if someone else took on the responsibility of negotiating with the Gamon. But there have been no other negotiations! All that has happened is that you and your thugs have violated the original agreements."

"I resent the use of the word thugs in this context!" bellowed Sire Opis.

"Is that all you object to? One word? You mean you admit your treachery and pretend it's duty?"

The chamber became a bedlam of insults and imprecations. Tigh gaveled the meeting back to order. "Gentlemen," he admonished, "let us keep these proceedings civil. We don't need a war in here."

When everyone had calmed down, Sire Opis put forth his position yet again with the usual candor. "As long as the Gamon withdraw, they will be safe. We have no desire to harm them. In fact, we believe that eventually they will appreciate all that we have to offer them. We are a sophisticated culture, after all."

This time there was a smattering of applause.

Apollo tried again. "There is more to the Gamon than we know. We are underestimating these people in a way that may prove catastrophic."

Sire Opis kept the dialogue going between Apollo and himself. Despite the consensus he had cobbled together in the Council, the other members were perfectly content to let him do all the heavy lifting.

"Commander, everyone in this chamber is aware of who has the power, weapons and authority to back up decisions and laws. None of that resides with the indigenous people of Paradis."

Apollo sighed. It was like trying to reverse thrusters past the point of no return. But he had no alternative but to keep fighting the inertia of the Council.

"No one is listening," he said. "Let me try again. Before I left the Gamon village they said that we would have no choice but to leave Paradis."

Sire Opis howled with laughter. "We're listening to you; we just can't believe that you take any of this seriously. The Gamon have no power! Their threats mean nothing. If you want to help them, don't believe their

childish fantasies but persuade them to return to their villages and allow Ryis to continue his work in peace."

Another Council member made a suggestion. "Shouldn't we be the ones making the threats?"

Sire Opis appreciated the support. "Exactly. Commander Apollo needs to inform his friends among the natives that if they don't leave New Caprica City we will have no choice but to take extreme measures in removing them."

"It's not too late to defuse the situation," said Apollo. "Even as we speak there is a standoff between the two sides. If we move swiftly, we can —"

Sire Opis interrupted. "Commander Apollo, it is later than you think. On behalf of the Council I formally request that you have the *Galactica's* lasers and cannons directed toward the principal villages of the Gamon, as well as selected targets around New Caprica City. We hope that we will not have to resort to such a massive show of force but we must be prepared to exercise the option. You have twenty-four hours to accomplish this task."

Apollo was stunned at the turn of events. The sheer audacity of the man impressed him.

President Tigh took advantage of Apollo's momentary shock to try and reassert some modicum of his authority. "Apollo, before you say anything please take a moment to think this over."

Sire Opis pressed on. "We wouldn't want to have to replace you, Apollo, especially after all you've managed to get us through these past several yahren; but a new era is dawning in the grand march of our civilization and we have to be prepared."

At that precise moment, Apollo was prepared to ram his fist down Sire Opis's throat, but he wasn't about to give his enemy yet another weapon to use against the warriors and the Gamon. Opis was doing everything he could do to goad the commander into rash action.

Only Tigh understood what Apollo was feeling. The two men didn't have to say anything. This was a time for Apollo to stay low, out of the line of fire.

But Opis couldn't leave bad enough alone. He decided to twist the blade in Apollo one last time and inadvertently gave the leader of the warriors something that Apollo could use for his side of the debate.

"You should send warriors down to the planet to aid civil authority in maintaining order," said the self-appointed spokesman for the Council.

"I think we could manage that," said Apollo, surprising everyone. He was thinking about the warriors on the ground right now. This offhand request had the backing of the Council, a most useful development indeed.

Sire Opis didn't fathom what he had just done but he didn't like the sudden cooperation from the commander. He decided to lay it on a bit thicker. "That doesn't shorten your deadline to have the weapons of the *Galactica* directed at the new targets."

"Nothing can shorten a deadline," said Apollo grimly.

The first thing he did when he was outside the chambers was get back in touch with Starbuck. First things first, he wanted to ascertain if anyone had done anything stupid yet. Starbuck said no, so Apollo passed on the good news.

"As of this moment, warriors are assigned to maintain civil order between the construction crews and the Gamon."

"You're kidding," said Starbuck. "How the hell did you pull that off?"

"A long story and it won't be long before we're ordered to do things we aren't going to do. But for the moment you can make it official that there is to be no violence against the Gamon at the site where you're assigned."

"How do I explain this to the foreman and the chief of police?" Starbuck wanted to know. Although the weapons had been lowered, they could have him and the other warriors back in their sites in a heartbeat.

"Let me talk to them," said Apollo. By the time he had finished explaining that he was acting under the express dictates of Sire Opis, the foreman and the policeman were addressing Apollo as "sir." He knew this subterfuge wouldn't last long. Sire Opis would order the warriors to join the police and the construction workers in firing on the Gamon.

But nobody at the site knew that. And by the time they figured it out, Apollo hoped to have formulated another ruse. There were times when even heroes had to be devious.

He thought that Baltar would approve.

He returned to his private quarters and lay down on his bed. He hadn't slept in days but sometimes it was good to adopt the prone position just to remember what it was like to sleep. Just going through the motions seemed to ease the mind.

Then he had to do what he wished he could put off indefinitely. Using the technology the Gamon held in such low regard, he contacted Athena. It was like a tonic to his soul to see his sister's face on the screen.

The love he felt for his sister was one of the few certainties in his chaotic life.

He brought her up to speed. "We'll need to send more warriors down to the planet. They can back up Starbuck and the others in the current crisis. I'll delay a final reckoning with Sire Opis and Ryis as long as possible. But

meanwhile, we have no choice but to train our weapons on select Gamon targets."

"Frack," was all she could think to say.

"They won't rest until we annihilate the Gamon."

"They're crazy."

"Even more than you think. This may be the most insane action ever taken in all Colonial history. For the moment, we have to follow orders. Realign the lasers and cannon. I'll meet you on the *Daedalus* in five centons to discuss our options."

No sooner did he break off communications with Athena than Starbuck was back on the line. The report was so far, so good.

"What do we do next?" Starbuck asked.

"Withdraw from the city. Make sure the construction crew leaves with you. That's crucial."

"What about the Gamon?"

"What are they doing right now?"

"Just holding back, watching us watching them. Maybe they're satisfied to just knock out the equipment today, although I'd love to know how they do it. It must be the same way they incapacitated the Vipers."

"Just be grateful they left your Viper alone. For right now, just leave the Gamon where they are. I have a few things to attend to first and then I want you and Boomer to meet me on the bridge of the *Daedalus*. I'll let you know when."

"We left Boomer back at the cave complex that Dalton and the others discovered," said Starbuck. "He wanted to check out the ruins of a possible starship. But I'll be there."

"Starship?" Apollo asked.

"Yeah, so much has been happening that I haven't had a chance to make my report yet. Rhaya discovered it on that same mission where she, Troy and Dalton went missing. As I said, Boomer is staying behind to check out the ship."

This was turning out to be a most interesting day. A patrol mission that had been assumed a disaster with the loss of good friends may have turned out to be the single most important mission ever flown on Paradis.

A starship? They thought they'd found the wreck of a starship?

"Have Boomer report to me as soon as he returns," said Apollo.

"You got it."

Chapter Eighteen

We are all fragments of the primary consciousness.

The elder sent out the message to every Gamon who could receive it. He was not alone in the dream hut. Others were with him, including Yarto. They could have been anywhere on the planet and heard the calling. But this was a special meeting and several Gamon leaders had joined the most elder of the elders in his dream hut.

"The last time we met here, the subject was the humans and your personal relationship with the one called Apollo," the Elder thought-spoke to Yarto.

"I have carried your insights with me since," answered Yarto.

The Gamon sat in a circle and breathed the blue mist. They were in the in-between place and appreciated that nothing more sacred could be experienced on this plane.

The second oldest Gamon expressed a strong opinion. "These invaders are not part of the consciousness and never will be."

"Some can be," said Yarto.

The second oldest did not back off from his challenge. He was not satisfied with small portions of anything as he demonstrated by taking the largest portion of the ritual herb. "None of them have potential. They are hardly better than animals."

"But animals are part of the consciousness," the elder corrected him.

The second oldest was chastened. "I did not express myself well. I recognize that all life is important."

The second oldest tried one more time. "What I mean to say is that the invaders have betrayed their own nature; and in closing off their spirit eyes, however weak and flickering those portals might be, they place themselves below animals. They betray themselves and have no role to play here and now or during the Great Change."

"Their lives are short and souls weak," said another of the elders. "They are not good examples of sapience or sentience."

Yarto understood that this was a preliminary to a more serious trial. He had been linked when the elder engaged with Gar'Tokk and Apollo. He still had hope that the situation could be turned around. In that sense he was a perfect mirror of the commander of the fleet.

"What of Apollo?" asked Yarto of the entire circle.

The elder breathed in and exhaled the blue aura of the sacred Gamon site. "The last time we convened I said that it was too soon to judge these beings. I stressed that they had not used their weapons against our people. That has changed."

"There is no denying that," admitted Yarto, "but is it right to judge an entire people by the actions of a few?"

Everyone felt a disturbance in the dream hut. The Elder came as close as he ever had to projecting anger. "The few now, the many soon. The question is do we save a spiritually dead people for the sake of the few?"

A wave of contentment came off the second oldest. As far as he was concerned, he had won. The other minds reached out for Yarto and examined his thoughts and feelings from every possible angle. He had made

himself spokesman for the Colonials and all present waited for his next expression of hope.

"Apollo may turn them," he said.

"It is possible," the senior elder agreed, "but the next move is his. We await his realization of what he must do. It must come from him."

The murmuring of assent was both vocal and mental, as if the actual sound of music were perfectly fused with the abstract notes underneath.

The elder pronounced a warning. "Yarto, you are not to help Apollo with the next step. You know that any such action would corrupt essential perfection."

Yarto bowed his head. He could only trust that Apollo would realize what must be done. Otherwise the next meeting in the dream hut would have grim consequences for the people who had come from outer space; they might be returned to the great void without their ships.

Apollo was about to leave his quarters when there was a knock on the door. He was surprised by his visitor.

"Koren," he said, "come here, will you?"

The boy walked over and they hugged. Apollo reminded himself that nothing was so important that a father couldn't find a moment for his son. If the whole world was literally coming to an end then a few moments with loved ones was of even greater importance.

Crisis situations ate at the heart like a corrosive acid. It was so easy to forget the important things in life.

"Are you okay?" he asked, pulling Koren over to his berth where they both sat down.

"Yeah, I guess so," said the boy. He was a bit sullen.

"You're not lonely, are you?"

The boy shrugged. "A little bit. I saw Caran not long ago. I like her better every time I see her."

Apollo smiled at that. "I've been meaning to tell you that Gar'Tokk and I saw an actual Gamon child."

"Cool! I knew there had to be some. Did you get his name?"

Apollo shook his head. "The boy didn't hang around long or I would have thought to do that."

Koren was very grown up about it. "Let me know if you run into him again."

"That's a deal. You know, I'm sorry I've been neglecting you lately," said Apollo.

"At times like this, you must really miss your real father."

Koren looked him in the eye. "I miss *you*, Apollo."

They sat together in silence for a few moments and then the boy started talking. "I do miss him, though. I don't think about it much but I feel it a lot. I mean, I feel him around me sometimes. At times like that it's as if I can hear him talking to me."

"What does he tell you, if that's not too personal a question?" Apollo asked softly.

The boy rubbed his eyes. He wasn't crying. Maybe he wanted to stop the tears before they started.

"Well, he says that I'm not alone so long as I can trust myself. He says I should trust my heart and listen for voices when everything is silent."

Apollo didn't have a ready reply. He let silence gather between them as if a comforting blanket. Then he said, "Jinkrat was right. Being alone is one

of the great challenges we face in life, but if anyone has ever truly loved you then you are not completely alone, even if you were the last person alive in the universe. It can be extremely challenging to trust your heart. You have the courage, don't you?"

"I try," said the boy.

For a moment, Apollo remembered his encounter with the Gamon elder. He'd heard a lot in the silences that day.

"I've had to learn the hard way that our minds can play tricks on us," Apollo told the boy. "We can think ourselves into perfectly logical traps."

"You have a lot of problems right now, don't you?" asked Koren with keen insight.

Apollo put his arm around the boy's shoulder and gave him a hug. He felt more like Koren's father than he ever had before.

"You know it. I have so much going on in my brain that it's a wonder my head doesn't explode."

"Ugh," said Koren. "That would be disgusting."

They both laughed. "Issues can become too complex," said Apollo. "They can get to the point where they seem impossible to resolve. But I've learned a secret."

"What is it?"

"When we're really centered and have quieted down the noise in our head, we can hear a deeper wisdom speaking to us."

"Wisdom is in the heart?"

"Better than the kidneys!" said Apollo and they both laughed. "It's just a saying. I think that wisdom comes from the heart and mind working together in some profound way. Maybe we don't have to understand how."

Koren felt that he was making up for lost time. Apollo had never talked to him this way before. "What is wisdom?" he asked.

Apollo grimaced. "You're giving me hard work, young man.

Philosophers argue over that one all the time. One of the great thinkers of Kobol suggested that wisdom is moving from a narrow and limited point of view to a more expanded perspective where we can hopefully make educated and knowledgeable decisions about life in general."

"Has coming to Paradis made you think more about these things?"

God, the kid was really sharp today. "You, too! How can a planet like Paradis not make us think about these things? Now enough pontificating." He tousled the boy's hair. "Time for you to get to bed. You'll need your sleep if you're going to help me solve the problems of a whole planet."

Koren gave his new father a friendly punch and then headed off down the corridor with a, "Goodnight, Apollo."

"Sleep well," said Apollo. He remembered Troy at that age and returned to his small room that suddenly seemed so much larger in the glow of what had just happened. Maybe everything was going to be all right.

As he lay down on his berth and again imagined what it would be like to actually sleep for a few Centons, he suddenly realized the importance of what had transpired between him and his son. Apollo had an epiphany.

Since he and Gar'Tokk had taken their leave of the Gamon elder, something had been nagging at the back of his cranium. There was something he had left undone. The conversation with Koren helped him to understand.

Leaving the presence of the elder did not mean the dialogue between them had to end. He could resume the conversation right here and now if there was still a link between them.

Breathing deeply, he attempted to quiet his mind the same way he did when he tried to reach his center. Meditation was natural to him but now it seemed different. There was a large mind, a collection of large minds and hearts, on the other end of his questing self.

Slowly, so very slowly, he felt the elder responding to the questioning tendrils of Apollo's consciousness. The communication was not about words or sounds; it was a fluid substance that enveloped the mind in total understanding.

Contact was made. The elder congratulated Apollo on taking the first step. Other Gamon minds floated in the background with encouragement and expressions of thanksgiving. Apparently this was a very important moment in Apollo's life and he could thank Koren for inspiring him to seek out the elder with his mind alone.

He began to describe details from the Council meeting but found that it was unnecessary. The elder already knew every disgusting and scandalous detail.

"The Gamon will do what must be," came the message into Apollo's brain with the sharpness of an icicle.

"And what is that?" Apollo asked.

"Enough for now. We will speak again soon."

As the communication ended, Apollo felt light-headed as if he'd been drinking the whole time. There was something intoxicating about full-immersion telepathy.

As he stumbled toward the door, he encountered Cassie. Where had he gotten the crazy idea that he'd have a little privacy in his quarters? He should just put up a sign announcing an Open House.

"Are you all right?" she asked, the concern on her face a mirror to what he must look like. His recent experience had drained him even though he never wanted it to end.

"Don't mind me, darling. As usual, I'm trying to claw my way out of a huge mess."

"Is there a time limit?"

"As always!" he said, with a wry smile. "If I'm late, a world goes to pieces. Not too much pressure there. But every miracle has a price!"

"Do I get to come in?"

He was so wasted that he hadn't even noticed that they had been locked in a frozen tableau that didn't seem able to move past his threshold. He made a grand gesture of inviting the lady to enter his bedchamber.

"I miss you," she said.

"I miss me, too," he said. She looked puzzled. He wasn't sure himself what he meant. He was still coming out of the trance.

"I wish we had time together," she said.

"By the Lords of Kobol, I wish that I could stop time in its track!

Time is always the enemy. There's no way to beat it. And I can't find the wisdom to surrender with grace."

She placed her palm on his head. "You feel a bit warm. Maybe you have a fever."

He took her hand and placed it on his mouth where he kissed the palm. "No time for anything small and personal. We have to deal with big things; always big, bigger, biggest!"

"Are you sure that you're all right?"

He gave her a hug. "Thank you for being you," he said. "You always mean what you say. You'd never believe how many people ask those words that just came out of your lovely mouth and don't mean anything by it. You are a good person and like most good people you don't even understand what most people are like."

"I don't get what you're driving at," she admitted.

"Exactly. When most people ask if you're all right they assume a positive answer. Anything else means they will put as much distance between themselves and you as possible. They only ask the question to make certain that you won't be causing them a problem."

She patted him on the cheek. "You're in a rare mood. Even with you like this, I wish we could spend more time together."

"Well, now you know why my father was alone most of his life. No one would put up with his impossible schedule."

She coughed as if her next words had been caught in her throat. "Apollo, tell me the truth. Do you want to be alone for the rest of your life?"

"No," he said softly, taking both her hands in his. "But I doubt that I have any other choice. Who wants to live with someone whose job is to be world savior? Baltar once told me that a woman would rather marry a villain than a hero because the bad guy is easier to predict and easier to control."

Cassie's gorgeous eyebrows shot up and stayed there. "I don't believe that Baltar is a good influence on you."

They laughed together.

"But seriously," he continued when they'd caught their breaths, "who is willing to love someone who rarely comes home and has to make his job

more important than his relationship? Tell me Cassie, what woman should have to make that sacrifice?"

"A woman who's in love," she said.

"And who is a big enough fool to love a man like that?"

"I am," she said and her words were music to his ears even though he wanted to shut out the sweet sound.

"Are you absolutely sure?" he asked, hating to sound like a prosecutor in a criminal trial.

Cassie turned her back on him and ran her fingers over several of his books on the night table. "You forget that I've been alone most of my life as well. You know the kind of life I led. I've been alone because I've never found a man willing to love only me."

She turned and drilled him with her ice blue eyes. He wasn't getting out of this one.

"Are you that man?" she asked, moving closer. "Could you love me and only me for the rest of your life?"

Gazing deeply into her eyes, Apollo could be having another telepathic experience. He could see a lifetime of heartache and frustration. One perfect tear fell from her right eye as she waited a seeming lifetime for Apollo to speak.

Words had never taken so long to find their voice. As he opened his mouth she placed a hand over his mouth and hushed him. "Take your time," she said. "You need to think about this. Wait until you know for certain! I couldn't take you saying yes just because you think you should."

He nodded and let her feel his smile grow on the softness of her palm.

"Just remember this," she finished for both of them. "No matter what you decide, I'll always be here for you. I love you too much to let pride get in the way. I'm your friend."

He gently removed her hand so that they could kiss. The kiss lasted a long time.

Athena leaned back in her chair and watched the stars. She liked them best when they were far away. Close up, they were suns with planets. That's where the trouble started. That's when you had to exercise judgment and try to take charge of destiny. As much as Athena liked to be in control, she was smart enough to understand the limitations of her own will.

At least she understood her limitations when the subject was at the macro level. Every good leader realized finally how much was up to chance no matter how good his plan and how carefully he delegated authority. Athena understood these things as well.

It was on the personal level where her portions of wisdom deserted her. And when her emotions were out of control, she was at greatest risk. Such as now, when Starbuck joined her on the bridge. Her body gave an involuntary start as he interrupted her reverie. He figured that wasn't a good sign and began to make a hasty retreat, but it was too late.

She had forgotten the stars in the sky because there were stars in her eyes for Starbuck. And as usual, the recognition of how she felt about him only pissed her off.

"Where are you going?" she asked without preamble.

For one micron he wished he was back on Paradis facing the guns.

"Uh," he said. "Ah."

"Why are you trying to avoid me?" she demanded.

"I'm not," he said, continuing to sidle toward the door.

"Then why are you moving away from me? Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"It's not what you think," he said, even as he continued to drift away. "I just thought I would take care of a few things before Apollo and Boomer arrive."

"What things?" she demanded to know.

Starbuck tried to think of something to say, but his mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water.

Athena had no trouble getting words out. "Starbuck, I'm a big girl now so don't think you can snow me! You've been avoiding me for months. Every time we have a chance to get together you always find an excuse to be somewhere else."

Instantly he thought of an excellent response. He imagined telling her in a voice dripping with sarcasm that he was deliberately avoiding her by placing himself in jeopardy, facing all sorts of planetary dangers. Yeah, he could say that and she'd be surprised for a moment. Then she'd make him pay.

Not everyone appreciated that discretion is the better part of valor. Starbuck kept his mouth shut and kept moving toward the door.

Athena was more than happy to do both parts of the conversation. "Let's get fracking honest here. What's going on? Are you running out on another relationship? That's your style, isn't it? Don't bother giving me the old Starbuck charm. I'm immune. I know you too well, Starbuck! Damn it, come back here!"

He stopped for a moment, gauging that he was at a safe distance. "You're right, Athena," he said. "I've got to admit that you're right. I am

avoiding you and I don't really know why."

"You bastard!"

"All right, stay calm now. Maybe I know why. I'm just not as eloquent in expressing my feelings."

"You are a bastard."

His feet were beginning to move again. "It's just that I'm not used to someone pressuring me all the time."

"How dare you say I pressure you! Take that back."

"You have many sterling qualities. You are one of the most beautiful women in the universe, and smart. Oh, you're very smart."

"I should feed you into the reactor," she said, but her voice was losing its shrill edge. She was getting tired.

"But you must admit that you require a lot of attention. I can truthfully say that you are the most demanding woman I've ever met. Why, Cassie would never—"

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than he regretted them. Why had he mentioned the name of the other woman? Athena was the sort who lacked a certain reasonableness when it came to the other woman.

"Cassie?" she echoed the name back at him as the shrillness returned to her voice. In the span of a few gasping breaths she had recharged herself.

"What about her?" Starbuck made a feeble and desperate attempt to get out of it. Athena almost laughed at his deep inadequacy.

"If you think I'm going to put up with what Cassie has had to deal with for the past twenty yahren, you're out of your mind. When are you going to grow up, Starbuck! How do you stand to look at yourself in the mirror—or is that your true love affair?"

Flashing through his mind was a vision of what a wonderful companion Athena would be if gagged, and maybe tied up as well. Yes, tying her up might be an expedient thing to do at times like this.

He tuned back in to hear what she might be saying now as he'd lost the train of her argument during his reverie. She was saying, "You are a woman's worst nightmare! And my brother Apollo is not too far behind! What is it with you guys? You have the balls to put your lives on the line every day, never knowing if you're going to come home. Yet you don't have the courage to love someone completely. Do you know what I think?"

He would pay handsomely not to find out.

"I think that's the true test of courage. To really open your heart and love someone with everything you've got. No games, no fracking lies or manipulations, just absolute love, you son of a bitch!"

He marveled at her ability to make the word *love* sound like a dire threat. In some utterly bizarre way they did understand each other.

"How about it, Starbuck? Do you have the balls to love someone completely?"

She stopped talking. He waited. Still, she didn't speak. He counted to ten. Still nothing. That's how he finally realized that she had not asked a rhetorical question. She really wanted an answer.

He resolved to be so mature that she wouldn't recognize him. Only a few moments ago he had resisted the impulse to be sarcastic. Now he would respond in a calm and mature manner.

He opened his mouth and out came: "Look who's talking, you crazy bitch! When the hell did you ever have the courage to love anyone yourself?"

She opened her mouth and was as stuck for an answer as he was. "You," she whispered.

"What?"

"You, Starbuck. I love you. I love you with all my heart! I've been afraid for months to admit it to myself. I didn't want to get hurt. But now it doesn't matter any longer. I've got nothing to lose. I'm in pain because I finally realized that I love you more than anyone I've ever loved in my entire life."

Outside the battlestar was the silence of outer space. But the silence beyond the hull was not deeper than the silence on the bridge as Starbuck digested what she had confessed to him.

"So what are you going to do about it?" she asked.

Starbuck attempted rising to the occasion. "I'm impressed with your honesty. I'm flattered. It takes a lot of guts to expose your feelings that way."

"And?"

"I'm going to get some ambrosia and think this over."

That shocked her sufficiently that he made his escape. Never once did a rather obvious idea cross his mind, something that she would stress over all night long:

"Why didn't he take me with him for that damned drink?"

Chapter Nineteen

Caran was thinking a lot about Koren lately. Although he annoyed her, she had to admit there was something about him she preferred over her other friends. And truth be told she didn't have all that many genuine friends. She suspected that Koren was a loner like her.

She liked to go out in the woods and play by herself. Her parents had built a home that wasn't very far from one of the Gamon villages. She loved to sneak up on it and pretend that she was spying. They were always nice to her and she was polite in return. As an only child, she talked to her parents more than others her age. Her mother insisted that she not cause trouble with the Gamon. At first her parents had been nervous about living this close to the natives but the passage of time had changed their attitude.

When Caran came down with a virus, a Gamon visited them with herbs that cured the fever. The family had done nothing to contact anyone about Caran's illness. They had no idea how the natives even knew of the girl's ailment. Somehow they found out that she needed help and provided it.

Later, Caran brought a basket of food to the village that was accepted with great fanfare. Most of the food consisted of local crops that the Gamon had in abundance; but a small portion of it was canned goods and kirasolis, her favorite sweet, from fleet supplies that had been doled out when Colonials first came to the planet.

The Gamon seemed to appreciate it.

Today, Caran remembered all this and wished she could tell Koren about it. She had a feeling of adventurous expectancy. The air was fresh and

birds flew everywhere. The gigantic insects that filled the air with perfume were in abundance. She'd been afraid of them at first until she found out that they were as harmless as skreeters.

It was a perfect day.

She returned to her favorite vantage point where she had an unobstructed view of the village. At first everything seemed normal but then she saw other Colonials sneaking up on the village. They were behaving as if they were doing a military exercise but they weren't warriors. They wore nondescript civilian clothes.

At first it seemed as if they were playing a children's game, the same as she did every day. But then she saw that they had a device with them. They turned on a switch and crept back into the woods.

She stayed where she was until the men were out of sight. Then curiosity got the better of her. Maybe the Colonials had left a gift for the natives the way that Caran liked to bring presents. But it could be a long time before the Gamon noticed the object on the outskirts of the village.

Caran thought this a propitious moment to investigate. She descended the hill. She felt the sun on the back of her neck. She tasted a sweet breeze wafting up from the village.

By the time she was close enough to see that the package was a solonite bomb, there was nothing she could do. The time had run out and she heard the whirring sound warning of immediate detonation. Not even a bomb disposal expert could have done anything.

She was more sad than angry. Her last conscious thought was of Koren.

Back in space aboard the *Galactica*, efforts were being made to stop something already begun.

Athena was steaming after her encounter with Starbuck. She was doing her best to get back in the saddle so she would be of use helping out with the current crisis.

By the time Apollo and Tigh arrived, she had succeeded in regaining her self control. She didn't show a flicker of resentment when Apollo asked about Starbuck's whereabouts.

"He had important business that came up right before you arrived," she said.

Apollo frowned. "He should be here. I would have liked both Starbuck and Boomer to be present, but at least Boomer's absence is unavoidable. We'll have to proceed without them."

"I agree," said President Tigh. "Our options are fast dwindling to nothing."

The two men filled in Athena on the horrific Council meeting. Then Tigh summed up the situation:

"If the Gamon don't retreat from New Caprica City they will be forced to do so by any means at our disposal. The weapons of the *Galactica* will target them both in their territory and in ours."

"That's madness," said Athena.

"I don't disagree," said Tigh, "but that is the decision we are forced to implement."

"I won't give the order," said Apollo.

Tigh shook his head. "I was afraid that would be your attitude. But under those circumstances, you'll be removed."

"What if I refuse as well?" asked Athena.

Tigh placed a large, warm hand on her narrow shoulder. "I understand, Athena, but the situation is unaltered."

The warriors stood at attention. The respect shown him was not lost on the president, who prized his own military background. He missed the days when they had been true comrades. Sometimes he thought he would give up everything to have those days again—even abandoning his beloved estate on Paradis.

"I don't want either of you to lose your command," he insisted. "That would mean control of the fleet would fall entirely into the hands of the Council."

"What can we do?" asked Apollo.

Tigh shook his head. "I haven't a clue. Ryis has the Council approving anything he does. I'm not sure who is dominant in the relationship between him and Sire Opis but they act as one. Sire Opis would make Ryis president if he could."

Athena shuddered. "You mean matters could get worse?"

"Much worse. They may call new elections soon to get rid of me. Then I won't be able to exercise the meager influence I continue to have simply by holding office."

"Things can get worse!" marveled Apollo.

"Please think about the situation carefully," Tigh advised his two friends. "Our future, the fleet's future, maybe even the fate of our entire people hangs in the balance."

Apollo struck a fist into his palm. The circumstances were untenable. More than anything he hated the false choice of damned if you do, damned if you don't!

He stated his position. "We have to find some other way out of this. I will not give orders to harm one innocent Gamon life!"

"If you can't make some tactical sacrifices, all is lost," came the voice of bitter experience from a worn-out president. Tigh did not like having to spell it out.

Athena couldn't believe it. How did they find themselves in such a mess? There had to be a way out.

She put her hand on her brother's shoulder. "I love you, Apollo, but I do not intend to turn over control of the fleet to those fools on the Council. I will do whatever I must to preserve our position of leadership."

"Do what?" he asked, studying her eyes.

"I won't beat around the bush. If I have to kill some Gamon, then I will. I'll do it with regrets. I'll try to avoid it! But if I must, they will die."

Apollo couldn't believe this turn of events. His friend could ask him to kill innocents? His sister could go along with it? How had they all come to such a pass?

"When you start digging graves make sure you dig one for me as well," he said. "You'll take these actions over my dead body!"

Tigh and Athena were stunned as Apollo left the bridge.

The new medicine helped a little. The headaches didn't vanish but Baltar found it easier to function. What he really wanted didn't come in a syringe or a bottle. There didn't seem to be any soporific that blocked the dreams.

Hell, he'd happily take anything that would keep the dreams from becoming nightmares. Failing that, he'd pump himself full of anything that

took away the memories of the dreams so that he could stop analyzing his night fevers all day long.

His current dream was not too bad. He was deep in a sea of sludge, failing to claw his way out as shiny razors rained down on him from above—each shard of metal shrieking little tin messages about the greatness of Imperious Leader—when he was saved by a knock on the door. Apollo was visiting.

"Come in," moaned Baltar, voice thick and heavy. He rubbed his eyes raw and half fell out of bed.

"Don't bother getting up on my account," said Apollo.

"Try and stop me," said Baltar. "To what do I owe this visit?"

"I need your help," said Apollo.

"The basis of a sound friendship," said Baltar, pulling on a ragged bathrobe. "I always need help as well, so we have the basis for a bargain. Maybe you'd like to enroll in my course?"

"I'm serious," said Apollo, taking a seat.

"Well, if I'm going to help you there is an element of my playing the role of teacher, I'm sure you'll agree. What is the problem?"

Apollo observed his old enemy with new respect. The man kept growing, which was no small accomplishment. What Apollo told Koren about wisdom wasn't a string of platitudes but the essence of what Adama's first son was coming to believe about life. Now he saw an example of his beliefs right in front of him.

Baltar was expanding his consciousness at a time when so many others of Apollo's friends and co-workers seemed to be shrinking theirs or standing still. The man was not a lost cause.

"I'm at my wit's end," Apollo admitted. While he struggled to find the right words, he realized that the old Baltar would have taken the opportunity to make a crack that if Apollo was at his wit's end, then the commander didn't have to go very far! The new Baltar didn't think that way any longer. Instead of seeking out opportunities to prove his cleverness, the man actually listened.

"Go on," said Baltar.

"Once again the Council has put all of us into an impossible situation. I am expected to take innocent lives in order to serve the agenda of colonizing this planet. Neither the Gamon nor our people are willing to compromise. The host race on this planet believes we've overstayed our welcome and I can't say that I disagree. But I'm placed in the position of choosing the Gamon or us! Our people who have been dying for the past twenty yahren in space want to stay on Paradis and rebuild their lives. Who am I to deny them that opportunity? Yet how can I live with a decision that may slaughter thousands of innocent natives? In addition, there are other developments leading me to believe there may be dangers on Paradis that we have yet to understand."

Apollo placed his head in his hands. Baltar scratched his chin and asked, "Other than that, how is it with you?"

Apollo allowed himself a small chuckle.

"Other than that, I have personal problems that are none of your damned business!" the commander was glad to tell him.

Baltar nodded. "You sum up the situation on Paradis with admirable clarity. Now you know the rigor and responsibility of command in every way that Adama did. That is the true test of leadership, I suppose—when you have to choose between those who will live and those who will die. A

doctor faces that on the battlefield when it's triage time. But only a political or military leader makes the choice on the grand scale."

"Yeah, but what to do?"

"I wish I had a clue. I can't even help you make your peace with your final decision, regardless of outcome. You might as well accept that you will be blamed and hated whether the outcome is good or bad."

Apollo shrugged. "You're right. No one can give advice on something like this."

"Well, maybe this will help, Apollo. After a lifetime of pain and introspection, I've come to believe that nobody wins unless everybody wins! I can hardly believe that I'm telling you this."

"Baltar is reborn," said Apollo with a smile.

"I feel that way! I tell you, a leader is always blamed by those who lack the balls to take responsibility for their own decisions. I don't envy you, Apollo. I do want to thank you for my new career. I have learned to appreciate what it means to take a job that requires so little of me but to tell the truth. As a result, I'm getting better at recognizing all the lies people tell themselves to make it through the day. You don't allow yourself that luxury, Apollo, and I respect you for that."

Apollo stood up, feeling oddly refreshed. "You've become a philosopher in your old age."

As Baltar extended his hand to Apollo, his smile faded. As he clenched his teeth and groaned, it was clear that he was suffering another of his relentless headaches.

But there was something different about this one. The man's hand went limp and the color drained from his face. He actually whimpered as he collapsed on the floor.

The commander called for help. None of Baltar's headaches had caused the man to pass out before. It didn't seem right that just as Baltar started learning how to be a human being that he should die.

Apollo believed that the story of Baltar was not over.

Something new was happening on Paradis. When the Colonials first arrived they couldn't decide how many natives lived on the planet. When statisticians and demographers did their best, they could never agree on a number.

Given the visible number of habitations, the population should be relatively small. But the Gamon had the unnerving talent of showing up in places where they had no visible means of sustenance. Having performed whatever mysterious tasks brought them there, they just as suddenly disappeared.

But until today, no Colonial had assumed the population of the Gamon capable of what the scanners showed and eyewitnesses reported from the ground. The native population must be huge for hundreds of thousands to begin gathering around contested construction sites. New Caprica City drew the lion's share of this population explosion.

Ryis sat in his plush chair in his ornate office and stared dumbfounded at the reports on his desk. "Impossible," he kept muttering. "There aren't that many of them."

He jabbed at controls on his desk and the face of his ally Sire Opis ' flickered on the screen. The Council member didn't seem to appreciate the gravity of the situation, no doubt because he was safely in orbit while Ryis was very much at ground zero.

"Battlestar weapons will be at your disposal," said Opis.

"They can only be so precise when finding targets on the ground!" countered Ryis.

"You'll be sent more warriors."

"That's no good," screamed the architect. "I'm not sure what side they're on."

"Don't you have your own trained security forces in addition to civilian police?" asked the man in space.

"You know I do," said the man on the ground, "but their numbers aren't adequate for this. We never calculated anything like this. You don't seem to understand what's happening. The natives can't possibly produce these numbers of protestors!"

Both men had access to the most current intelligence. On their screens they saw the milling throngs surrounding New Caprica City. A sea of natives spread out to the horizon.

"How can this be happening?" Ryis asked the universe at large. "Where have they been hiding themselves all this time?"

"Underground?" Opis suggested.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Well, you asked. I don't see why you're so upset."

Ryis stared at the monitor screen in front of him as though it had short circuited. "You don't appreciate the danger of this?"

"They don't have weapons," said the portly Council member. "Isn't that what matters?"

"Sire Opis," Ryis began in the tone of voice one might use for a child, "you overestimate the utility of weapons. A nonviolent protest with these kind of numbers is equivalent to a whole battery of weapons. The sheer

mass of numbers makes it impossible to carry on business as usual. In case you've forgotten, we're in the business of business as usual."

Sire Opis didn't fully appreciate the point. "We can always use the *Galactica* to fire at the outer edge of the circle the Gamon are forming around the city. That is a sufficient distance to keep you and your people from danger. We could go right around the circle, bringing the beam in closer every time until there are no more reinforcements of their numbers from outside the circle they've formed. That would give you a more manageable number to deal with at the gates of the city proper. We could make certain the warriors we send to you are loyal to our cause. Your own people could do a holding action until the warriors arrive."

Ryis tapped his fingers on his desk. He always did that when he was impatient. "We can discuss strategy and tactics later, Sire Opis. The Gamon are not breaching the walls of the citadel just yet. Our immediate problem is how equipment always tends to break down when they pull these stunts. And you still haven't addressed my greatest concern."

"Which is?" asked the man with infuriating calm.

Ryis spelled it out. "If we don't know the source of their numbers, your plan is useless if they can produce more numbers from the same inexplicable place. We don't know how many we are fighting or how they are getting here!"

"Oh," said Sire Opis.

"Right," said the architect. "I'll get back to you."

He broke off the connection and broke out his last bottle of ambrosa.

Not only Ryis noticed the flood of Gamon. Gar'Tokk hurried to Commander Apollo with the same report. The Borellian Noman was not concerned about an explanation for the sudden population explosion among

the natives. For some time he had concluded that the Gamon were magicians. The night Yarto managed to sneak up on Gar'Tokk's hilltop, the Noman concluded that these guys had plenty of tricks they hadn't bothered to use yet.

Apollo had just left Baltar in sickbay. He was in the mood for good news. This was the closest he was going to get.

"Looks like the showdown is tomorrow morning," said the commander, his military instincts back in play. "I wonder what the elder meant when he said that we'd have no choice but to leave this planet? Maybe the increased numbers of Gamon is meant as a last warning."

The two walked down the corridor as they talked, moving like well-oiled machines ready to do battle. Since they were both natural fighters they assumed military motives behind any threat. At this point the elder's words didn't sound like a spiritual pronouncement to either of them.

Apollo would have tried for a telepathic link right then if the elder had not been so firm that he would initiate the next contact.

Gar'Tokk didn't need to use his telepathic abilities to share thoughts with his old friend. "The Gamon *appear* to be primitive, like the Nomen. But that is misleading. I now believe they are far in advance of you humans."

Apollo nodded. "I've been coming to that conclusion myself."

"I have more to report," Gar'Tokk said. "Boomer has contacted Starbuck."

"With news about the crashed starship?" Apollo anticipated him.

"Yes. He says that we need to do a full study of the vessel. He also requests that we join him. He needs us to interpret ancient symbols and writings he has found on the ship. I told him I will come."

"Good. That sounds important, and you should go. My hands are tied for lack of information. There might be something on that ship I need to know about. But I can't leave my post. Tomorrow is only eighteen centons away. If all hell breaks loose I'll be expected to bark orders right in the middle of it."

Gar'Tokk nodded. "Are you sure that you don't want me to stay?"

"Old friend, there is no one more suited for a fight than you but right now you need to help Boomer. Report back to me if there is anything unusual."

"Who will fly the mission?" asked Gar'Tokk.

"Let's give this assignment to Starbuck," he said. "He needs more to do since he keeps missing meetings! I'll pass on the orders."

They parted and Apollo watched the sturdy back of his alien friend. Those muscles were indeed meant for fighting. But what Apollo needed now was not another warrior. He needed a miracle.

Chapter Twenty

This was the day he dreaded. The odds were that it would never happen. He could always tell himself that he suffered from an unreasonable fear and that was no good reason to avoid a career he wanted so badly.

So Captain Page had taken that first step and joined the military police. In short order he was promoted. He had an exemplary record. He was known for sense of fairness, but no one considered him a pushover. He was good at his job and there was no reason to worry over the possibility of one dreaded day.

But that day had finally arrived. It crept up on him without fanfare. It brushed him on the back of his neck and made itself known. The Council had huffed and puffed and now it was up to Captain Page to implement their decision.

Some terrible ghost calling itself The Law was telling him that he must act under the orders of the civilian Council. That meant he must gather together a contingent of officers and they must go on the bridge of a battlestar, and there they must inform the leaders of the warriors just what they were to do and how and when.

Captain Page admired warriors. He had a son who wanted nothing more than to join their exalted ranks. The young man had even taken a class from the arch-traitor Baltar so that he could report to the warriors if his teacher wasn't behaving himself. The would-be warrior had been informed that he was not the only student with his special assignment. He liked to play a game and imagine how many other students might also be keeping tabs on

Baltar. He didn't hesitate to criticize his teacher so no suspicion would fall on him that he might be a spy.

Page laughed when his son suggested that maybe the entire class had been assigned to spy on Baltar. The old villain might even take that as some kind of honor.

Captain Page had never told his son the one thing he dreaded most—the idea that one day he might be assigned the unwelcome duty of going up against warriors on their own ships. Page admired them. He had studied their exploits. He never let himself forget the debt of gratitude that all civilians owed these true heroes of the spaceways.

The last thing he wanted was an altercation with Apollo and his inner retinue. The particular order he had just been given galled him. But Page had a duty to perform, the same as the warriors. He kept telling himself about his duty as he gathered his men and arranged transportation to the battlestars circling above.

Today his job sucked even worse than when he had confronted Starbuck at the city gates. But at least that had been on Page's home turf. He could tell himself that the warriors were interlopers there.

He didn't want to mess with warriors on their home turf. They were at their best up there in space. They could handle Cylons. He wasn't about to let his men forget that.

Apollo allowed himself a moment's sleep. He figured that if he didn't catch a few winks, his judgment would be adversely affected. But he'd been so wound up that it wasn't easy to shut down the adrenaline pumping through his system. If he was addicted to anything, his own body produced it.

Before returning to his quarters he'd taken a moment to gaze out the large space window revealing Paradis in all her glory. The planet was so beautiful that it reminded him of the gorgeous women in his life. Maybe beauty was the curse of the universe, driving men to acts of folly and despair.

He couldn't imagine men fighting to the death over a burned-out cinder of a world. But the blue-and-green globe beckoning to him with its promises of lushness and life was worth fighting for. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe there were too many things worth killing for. And dying for.

The moment he crawled into his berth he plunged into unconsciousness with the speed of a stone dropping down a well.

However long he rested in the calm center of dreamless sleep he didn't know, but what seemed to be a dream finally intruded. He dreamed that he was rested and refreshed even while he slept.

His dream was nothing like one of Baltar's nightmares. It drew on no sources of wild imagination. There was nothing threatening. It was a pleasant vacation not to be threatened.

Gar'Tokk strode into the black center of his sleeping mind. He simply wanted to talk. Was this a telepathic communication? If so, there was no particular content to the message. It was pretty much a wake-up call with a strong suggestion that they touch base as soon as possible.

Apollo awakened, feeling a powerful tug on his solar plexus. There must be something to his fragment of a dream. He better check in.

The comlink did not show any messages from Gar'Tokk, nor was he able to raise him. As long as he was at it, he tried to reach Starbuck. No luck there either.

When all else fails, call on your sister. He made contact with Athena, hoping neither would bring up their last conversation. The less said about that right now the better.

"I'll send out a patrol to see what the problem is," she reported. Suddenly he heard the sounds of a scuffle behind her, although he couldn't see past her picture on the screen to identify the cause of the disturbance.

"You won't believe this," she said, tilting the screen so that he could see a contingent of civilian police storming the bridge of the *Daedalus*.

"They aren't wasting much time," he said morosely.

"You better check the bridge of the *Galactica*," she said.

"Right."

Before the link was broken, a civilian captain approached Athena. "May I speak to the commander?" he asked with more politeness than she expected.

"I'm here," said Apollo.

"Allow me to introduce myself, sir. I am Captain Page of the civilian authority. We've been sent here to see that you carry out your orders to fire upon Gamon targets tomorrow morning if they refuse to end their protest and leave New Caprica City peacefully."

"We have received your message loud and clear, Captain," said Apollo.

"My men are also aboard the *Galactica* at this time, Commander. We regret this sudden increase in surveillance and supervision but we have explicit instructions."

"I understand," said the commander. "We did not put measures in place to prevent your boarding of our ships."

"We appreciate that, sir."

"I have no doubt of that. I take it that you will remain at your posts until the order is given to open fire on the planetary targets?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll leave you in the capable hands of my sister while I attend to matters aboard the *Galactica*."

He doubted that the police official noticed the expressions exchanged between Apollo and Athena over the screens. She had a pretty good idea about what he meant.

He had no intention of going anywhere near the bridge of his own ship. Instead he got out of his quarters as fast as possible, that being a logical place for the patrol to seek him out. The first thing he did was enter an engineer's supply cubicle. Putting on work clothes and a soiled cap disguised him sufficiently.

Then he headed for the launch bay. The disguise worked fine and he made it past a police patrol. He was surprised at the lack of security in the launch bay. A few bored men provided no problem. He didn't even need to incapacitate them. They figured he was there to work on a Viper, not take off in one.

A very sloppy job of security, he concluded as he shot out of the bay.

But the moment he got into space he realized why it had been so easy to escape the *Galactica*. Somebody in authority had come up with the not very bright idea of putting civilian patrol ships around the battlestar to keep warriors from escaping.

The only smart idea they'd had was putting a lot of ships out there. His apex pulsar engine was music in his bone marrow; he wasted no time grabbing his navi-hilt and leading his escort on a merry chase around the planet.

He hoped that he wouldn't have to kill anyone, but more and more of the ships began to show up. For one crazy moment he could almost sympathize with Ryis and his henchmen trying to deal with the overwhelming number of Gamon.

As they began to surround him, a metallic voice informed him to return to base. It was probably a bad connection but for a micron he almost thought he was hearing a Cylon.

Despite being outnumbered, he continued to play the game of leading them on a chase. But it couldn't go on forever. They kept coming, more and more of them. Where the hell did they get so many ships? A lot more construction had been going on than he'd let himself fully realize. No wonder the civilian budget was so huge as the warrior budget was cut to the bone.

When he was told to surrender for the third time, the inevitable followed. Some damned fool fired on him. Still, he tried to avoid returning fire but he was fast losing the option of not fighting back. Before he finally had to act decisively, the choice was taken out of his hands.

The nearest police patrol ship was blown to kingdom come. The next nearest came apart more slowly as its metal skin peeled off it as if an invisible scalpel dissected it. Then that ship also went to pieces.

Out of nowhere, Apollo had a wing man. Zooming to the rescue was Starbuck, a burning rocket of tobacco between his teeth. Apollo didn't know anyone who could smoke and fight at the same time as well as Starbuck.

The two of them got out of there fast, but they no longer had to worry about the other pursuing craft. The destruction of two ships had made the point, eloquently.

"Thanks," said Apollo over the speaker in his helm.

"Who else is going to save your ass at a time like this?" answered his old buddy. "It's a tough political decision you had to make about whether or not to blow those amateurs away!"

"We need to find Gar'Tokk and Boomer," said Apollo.

"Fine with me. Any excuse to keep from hanging out on that stuffy old bridge, right?"

"You're right about that. Come on. We've got very little time."

They flew.

"Hey, what's going on back at the fleet?" asked Starbuck. "Just after landing, the new civilian police force tried to confiscate my ship so I quickly took off. I've been flying around, trying to figure out what to do, when I saw that you could use some help."

Apollo filled him in, complete with his sending a message that Starbuck fly Gar'Tokk to their current destination. It came as no surprise that the message never got through. They'd lived through chaos and the breakdown of a chain of command so many times before that the current disasters just seemed like a return to normal.

So they weren't really surprised when they reached what Starbuck liked to call the ass-end of the planet and received welcoming laser fire! Paradis was not what she used to be.

Fortunately, Gar'Tokk reached them with a message that guided them down and out of the line of fire. The Noman wasn't sure who the enemy was at the moment—only that whoever was firing had provided a warm welcome for Gar'Tokk and killed the pilot who had brought him down to the planet.

The Noman led them into a cave and through a maze of tunnels, retracing the route that Troy's group had taken. Boomer had refused to leave

the starship. And when Apollo finally saw the craft with his own eyes he understood why Boomer had developed such a protective attitude.

"By the Lords of Kobol," whispered Apollo.

"You can say that again," Starbuck agreed.

"Come on inside," said Boomer. "Seeing is believing."

Starbuck demurred. "I want to see the space museum as much as anyone but we know there are unfriendlies out there trying to fry us. We don't have a door to shut on those cave openings. I'll stand watch."

"Thanks, Starbuck," said Apollo. "I'll tell you about all the exciting parts later!"

"Take a picture, will you?"

With Starbuck on guard, the others entered the ship. At first, Apollo was amazed at the size of the thing but soon he was more impressed by the design. Gar'Tokk led him to what remained of the bridge.

"Did you try and contact me telepathically?" Apollo asked as he followed the Noman.

"There's something about this ship that focuses mental energy," was the answer. "I didn't have to try and reach you. I thought of how I would have to report to you what Boomer found here. I felt at that moment that we were in contact the way we were the day we shared contact with the elder."

Gar'Tokk gestured at the control panel where a purple light slowly flashed on and off.

"I don't believe it," said Apollo.

"Yes, some of the equipment still works!"

Boomer joined them. "I accessed the ship's log," he said. "Let me play this for you."

Gar'Tokk was indispensable at this point. He translated an old story:

"The computer log tells how the Thirteenth Tribe arrived here and found a primitive but peace-loving race. The natives welcomed them to Paradis. The space travelers decided to colonize the planet and stayed for two thousand years, bringing advanced education and technology to the people who called themselves the Gamon.

"Unfortunately, contact with the technology and culture of the Thirteenth Tribe damaged the Gamon. They gave up the ways of peace and studied war. The log reports that they began to fight among themselves. The keeper of this record laments that the Gamon should never have been provided with machines and information that caused culture shock. Then the log-keeper goes on to say:

"With time, our scientists, through intensive research, eventually discovered that their sun is nearing its final stage of evolution. It will shrink to a white dwarf within the next fifty to one hundred thousand yahren. In the process, it will lose its gravitational hold on its outer layers, which will be blown out into the solar system—a deadly hurricane of radiation. Due to that realization and the grim fact that we couldn't take the Gamon with us, we have decided to leave for the stars without them.

"The tragedy is that the Gamon have grown dependent upon us and don't want us to leave. They have sabotaged several of our ships, which now lie in ruins. The majority of the fleet has escaped. We are the unfortunate ones. We are about to die as our filtration systems have been destroyed and we've been poisoned with a mysterious drug that escaped detection until too late.

"This ship is now set to detonate so that the Gamon will not have access to the most dangerous information. Furthermore, it is essential that—"

Gar'Tokk stopped translating because the next portion was in the universal language of screams and explosions.

"Do we have any idea of how old this log might be?" asked Apollo.

Boomer glanced over notes he'd been keeping. "I've been trying to ascertain that information from the position of the stars on the charts when these messages were recorded. My best estimate is one hundred and twenty thousand years."

"This discovery is very important," said Apollo. "We must get back to the fleet. This information could dramatically alter the Council's evaluations. What have our scientists been doing all this time?"

The silence was deafening. Something was wrong somewhere. Before they could pursue Apollo's line of thought they had a more immediate problem.

The sound of ground crackling and the smell of burning air was well known to every veteran. Starbuck yelled at the same moment. They were under attack by laser fire.

The bastards had found them. At least they'd know the identity of the enemy real soon.

While Athena wore out boot leather pacing back and forth on the bridge of the *Daedalus*, President Tigh wore out his patience in the Council chamber. He was her last line of defense. If he failed, she'd have to give the order that she would hate as much as Apollo.

But she would do it, and the blood of thousands of Gamon would be on her hands.

Ryis had deigned to take a shuttle up so that he could personally attend this crucial meeting. Tigh was coming to the conclusion that the architect

was the real power behind the throne. Sire Opis was probably expendable, after all.

Ryis made his own speech this time.

"If we back down now, we will never again be taken seriously by the Gamon. They must learn that our word is law and that if they don't obey our laws, they will suffer the consequences. The Council received word that even more Gamon are gathering and that the situation is extremely dangerous.

"We must act now before it's too late. The Gamon have already indicated that we have no other choice but to leave this planet. I don't know how the rest of you respond to that, but it sure sounds like a threat to me. What can it possibly mean but that they are going to attack us? And as my dear old mother once taught me, the best defense is a good offense. And I've always believed in being offensive!"

Someone stifled a chuckle and Ryis looked up from his notes, but couldn't nail the culprit. He cleared his throat and plowed on.

"I believe that they could attack at any moment. By then it may be too late. We have the power to act right here in this hallowed chamber. I recommend that we exercise this power before it's too late."

Ryis sat down to general applause. He milked it for all it was worth. Tigh wanted to throw up. He noticed that Sire Opis only gave polite applause. Did that mean some breach between the two of them, or was it that it was just too much of a physical strain for the frail Council member to actually clap his hands with sufficient force to make a noise?

The chair recognized Tigh. His speech was considerably shorter than the architect's.

"We haven't heard from Apollo yet," said the president. "We should wait and see if he was able to negotiate with the Gamon."

"Negotiate what?" exploded Ryis, without waiting to be recognized. "If he made a deal, then why are the Gamon arriving at our city in greater numbers than before? If we wait any longer, the blood of our own people will be on the hands of this very Council!"

Tigh had to admit the man was a good speaker. At least he had something to say. The President had run out of arguments because he didn't have one these gentlemen wished to hear.

A vote was called. It was unanimous. The battlestars were to unleash the fury of the gods upon the primary Gamon village if the natives hadn't departed the precincts of New Caprica City by 0900 hours. That first massive show of force was meant to get their attention.

Tigh stormed out of the Council chamber. He needed to talk to someone who was sane. He found Dalton, still recovering from her last adventure.

"I'll find Apollo," she volunteered.

He wouldn't dream of letting her go in her current condition if they were in normal times. But under these circumstances, he couldn't say no.

"Thank you," he said. "Communications are blown to hell. We need to get the good guys together."

She smiled. "Do you have any idea how I can get off this tub? I understand that security has been increased in the landing bay since Apollo slipped past."

"Are you worried about the patrols hovering around the battlestars?"

"Are they warriors?" she asked.

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then I'm not worried. So what's your advice about getting out of here?"

Tigh smiled. It wasn't that long ago that he'd been a warrior himself. His blood still beat faster at the thought of combat.

"I'd suggest finding yourself a good partner. One of you distracts the guards while the other sets off a bomb—just a small one that won't breach the hull—to really do a job of drawing attention away from your purpose. Then the two of you dive into your ships and it's thrusters on full!"

"Thanks," she said, squeezing the strong hand of a man who belonged not in the Council chambers but back behind controls that made the difference between life and death. "I'll follow your advice."

She found Rhaya. Together, they located Sheba and Trays. They filled them in and implemented their plan. It took mere microns to secure their Vipers in the launch bay.

As for what happened in space, the civilian pilots remembered what Starbuck had done to two of their ships. They barely put up token resistance.

Warriors were fracking dangerous!

Chapter Twenty-One

He's going to get us killed," said the first construction worker. "Who?" asked a second. "The boss. Ryis."

"How do you mean?"

The two men had worked hard, believing that building a new life on Paradis was worth the effort. It had never occurred to them that killing their hosts would be part of the deal.

No one had a better view of the massed Gamon protestors than they did. These two workers were on top of the tallest building in New Caprica City. They were part of a team that was constructing scaffolding so an extension could be added. Tall, taller, tallest! Ryis was never finished or satisfied with his buildings.

From their vantage point, the workers could see the gathering natives form a sea of living flesh that seemed to ripple in the light from the red sun. There was not a cloud in the sky this morning. It promised to be a hot, clear day.

"There's too many of them," said the first man. "They'll swarm over this city like bugs and they'll take us all down."

"But they're nonviolent. Nobody's seen them with a weapon yet."

"How long do you think that will last when we keep shooting them?"

"Well, you've got a point there. But don't you think they would have started using weapons by now if they had any?"

"I don't know about that, but like I said, they may not need weapons. There's too many of 'em. They don't need guns or spears or clubs or much of anything like that when there's so many. They'll swarm over us like bees on spilled ambrosia, and then where will we be?"

"You're starting to depress me. I hear the battlestars are gonna' use their big weapons if they have to."

"Maybe so, but then we have to worry about being blasted by our own boys. We're in the middle of it."

"You think we'd be better off if we were closer to the ground?"

"Nah, the mob would get to us quicker."

"So what's so good about being up here? Seems we might get hit quicker by the big guns of the *Galactica*."

"You have a point there. Now you're depressing me!"

The two men were silent for a while. They'd brought breakfast with them so they took a moment to eat. Then the second worker noticed a communicator that the first had in his lunch box.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"What?"

"That wrist communicator!"

"Don't get any pictures but it carries good sound."

"You linked to anybody?"

"Yeah, my brother. He's gonna' contact me when something happens."

"Where is he?"

"Right at the gates where everyone expects the showdown."

"He's in more danger than we are, don't you think? If trouble starts, he'll be in the middle of it."

"True. But like I keep telling you, we don't have a chance either way if it gets out of hand. You can count, can't you? We're surrounded! Where the hell would we go—unless we can sprout some wings and fly away."

"Maybe a Viper will pick us up and fly us to safety."

"That would be nice, but why would a warrior single us out for such an honor?"

"Because we're high up, of course. It's easy to see us from the air. We might be the only ones rescued if the mob sweeps in."

"You might have a point about that. And of course we won't die if they stay nonviolent, I suppose. We should keep that in mind."

They'd run out of things to say again but this time they had an alternative to each other's company. The wrist comlink buzzed into life.

"My brother's calling in."

"Can I listen?"

"Don't see how I can stop you."

The brother's report was brief. No sooner did he get through to them than they heard someone shouting something about an unauthorized transmission and the line went dead.

Down below, out of the line of sight of the two workmen, Ryis swaggered onto the scene like some kind of self-styled soldier, dressed in blacks and golds with braids and buttons. He was surrounded by military guards. A few Council members were there as well, but his most loyal supporter, Sire Opis, was absent.

President Tigh was there too, as much to keep the peace as to enforce the will of the Council.

Ryis had a bullhorn with him that would work even if there was a general power outage, a frequent occurrence at mass Gamon protests.

"Attention, Gamon!" he shouted at the crowd. "You must disperse by 0900 hours or the battlestars will begin firing to clear the areas we need of Gamon protestors. If you still persist, we shall have to fire on your villages. This is your final warning."

Suddenly the crowd parted for the oldest Gamon any Colonial had ever seen. The elder didn't normally make public appearances.

As he moved forward, an anxious Ryis spoke into his bullhorn. "Seize that—"

But before he could finish, Tigh grabbed the bullhorn away.

"Show respect to this man!" shouted Tigh. "We don't have to kill one another. Everyone stand your ground."

The elder stopped a short distance from the Colonial officials. The tumult died down. A crowd of tens of thousands stood in silence.

The workman on the tower heard from his brother again.

"Hey, Josh, it's really noisy down here. Hope you can hear me okay. Oh, you can hear me? Great! No, I don't care if your pal listens. So here's what's going on down here—"

High up on the construction tower, the workman named Josh shook his wristcom a few times, then got his brother back on.

"We lost you for a bit," he said.

"Sorry about that," answered the brother.

"So what's happening?"

"Not much. The Gamon are standing there. The old one is smiling. Ryis is frowning. That seems to be it."

"No one wants to listen to reason?"

"Not really, no. I'll call you back as things change."

The two men decided that staying on their high tower seemed like a reasonable choice.

Deep below the planet's surface, Galactican warriors were fighting for their lives. The leg of Starbuck's uniform was smoldering but the laser hadn't taken off any skin. That was about as close as he liked to get to a blast.

Gar'Tokk, Apollo and Boomer joined him. Apollo tried to contact Athena but to no avail. "We've got to get out of here fast," said Apollo. "More is at stake than our lives. We have to stop the Council from initiating full-scale war on the Gamon!"

"What are you trying to say?" asked Starbuck. "Is it time for me to be a hero again and save your ass?"

Apollo grinned. "That's in our contract, isn't it? I put my ass in trouble and you save it!"

Without waiting for an answer, Apollo started firing with his blaster and ran in a zig-zag pattern. He didn't even bother to tell anyone to cover him. His comrades acted automatically but none with greater precision than Starbuck, looking for payback for his leg.

Apollo ducked laser fire as he ran. He almost avoided injury but he took a hit in his right shoulder and went down. Gar'Tokk shouted a war cry but Starbuck was even louder. Acting as one, they took off after Apollo, firing their weapons like madmen.

Boomer held back because someone had to provide covering fire. He cursed at the extensive fire power they were up against.

Reaching Apollo first, Starbuck attempted to pull his friend and commanding officer to safety but laser fire appeared around him as if a spiderweb made of light. Somehow, he got Apollo on his shoulder just as he himself was hit and they both went down.

Gar'Tokk's war cry could have split stone as he reached their position. Another cry emanated from Boomer, who couldn't hold back any longer and made a dash for the others. Boomer seemed to be firing in half a dozen directions at once, covering the Noman's back.

The four came together in the killing zone just as Starbuck pushed Apollo out of the way. The next round of fire caught him in the chest and he went down ugly. This time Starbuck screamed and it wasn't a war cry.

Now it was Apollo's turn to help his friend. He dragged Starbuck out of the line of fire and eased him into a sitting position.

Boomer spoke for all of them. "We're dead if we don't get out of here now."

No one argued. They could see the shadows of their attackers moving in to cut off their escape. Starbuck was fading in and out of consciousness.

"Don't give up, Starbuck," said Apollo. "You can make it. We're going to make it!"

Starbuck revived a bit, just in time to argue. "What's the matter with you? I'm dying."

Ducking laser beams was not the most auspicious environment in which to have a heart to heart, but they were effectively out of the line of fire. So the conversation continued apace.

"Hang in there, old buddy."

"Apollo, listen, all right? I'm in too much pain to stretch this out. I want you to know that although I'm jealous of you and Cassie, she deserves someone like you."

"You're not dying!"

"You're not paying attention. It even hurts to move my mouth, but I'll try again. My whole life I've been trying to prove that I don't need anybody. Cassie was the first woman who got through to me! She scared me worse than death. I've never been afraid of that—as I'm about to prove. I ran away from her. You don't need to run. You can do something I never could and make her happy."

Then Starbuck ended the discussion by passing out. There was so much fracking history among all of them. Apollo wasn't about to let Starbuck get out of it by dying!

"Why do you think they've stopped firing?" Boomer asked close to Apollo's ear.

"Maybe they've been eavesdropping on our personal business," he replied.

"They're waiting for us to move," muttered Gar'Tokk.

"Then maybe we shouldn't move at the moment," said Apollo, fully aware that however near Starbuck was to death's door, the snipers would finish pushing him through the moment they got a bead on his inert body.

There had to be a way out, but at the moment Apollo couldn't think of it.

And then they heard the sound of small rocks sliding—but the noise came from behind, not in front. Apollo's first thought was that they had

been flanked by their attackers, but the geography of the caverns would not have allowed that. Then who—?

"Don't shoot!" came an urgent whisper. "It's us!"

Dalton, Trays, Rhaya and Sheba moved slowly out of the shadows, crouching, but with hands in the air. Their situation was bad enough—no one wanted to be the victim of friendly fire.

"Where did you come from?" Apollo was stunned. His spirits soared at their presence, but just as quickly sank as he realized there were now more who could die in the bowels of these caverns at the hands of their unseen enemies.

"Well, we had to steal our Vipers and shoot our way off of the battlestar," Trays said casually. "You know, the usual drill," he added with a grin. "Having been down here before, we knew where you'd gone. When the shooting started we had almost reached you."

"Lords of Kobol!" Dalton exclaimed when she saw Starbuck wounded and unmoving. She knelt by his side. "Is he—?" she began but could not finish her question.

Apollo knelt down and turned the stricken Dalton to face him. "He *is* seriously wounded. But he will make it out of here alive. We all will. I promise you that." Despite the apparent hopelessness of their situation, the calmness and sureness of his steely voice brought the group a spark of hope.

"Who are we fighting?" asked Rhaya.

"We were ambushed. Still haven't seen who's shooting," Apollo explained.

"Wonder why they've stopped?" asked Boomer.

"Hmm. Can't be good. Okay, let's change things around. I say we go on the offensive. Let's take the fight to them," Apollo said. He checked his blaster, made sure that Starbuck was safe and secure in a place from which they could easily retrieve him, and told the others to prepare to charge.

"I will see their faces as they die!" promised Gar'Tokk.

Moving as one, they rose up and charged the unseen enemy. They formed a wall of screaming warriors, aiming high as they ran. Before their enemies could so much as draw a bead, large sections of the cavern ceiling—severed by laser fire—fell on top of them.

The Galacticans swarmed over the other side's position, pulled their stunned victims out of the rubble and dust and didn't take a single casualty. Gar'Tokk lunged at one of the snipers—the only one who had neither lost nor dropped his weapon—and, true to his word, broke the man's neck before he could fire, killing him instantly. The others quickly surrendered.

"What have we here?" asked Dalton, getting a good view of the bad guys.

Apollo recognized their terrified captives. "These are Ryis's men," he hissed.

Aboard the *Daedalus*, Athena was trapped in an untenable situation. She had stalled as long as she could, but now the time to execute Ryis's heinous order was almost at hand. She could think of no other way to postpone the moment.

President Tigh and Ryis had left the planet with affairs at a standoff and quickly returned to the battlestar. Now the two of them, and most of the Council members, surrounded Athena like a gang about to initiate a mugging.

If only Apollo would contact her! What in blazes had happened to him? She'd already set the coordinates for the primary target, the large crowd of Gamon that still surrounded Ryis's primary building site. The only sympathetic face in the room was Tigh's. The others were combinations of nervousness and anger.

Then there was the exception to normal human reactions. Ryis seemed to wear malice as if a well tailored suit. Only he projected a sense of joy. His primary ally, Sire Opis, sensed there was something skewed about the architect but there was nothing he could do about it now.

Only Athena could do anything, and that would be through further inaction. But if she backed down on her cold promise to Apollo, what was to stop someone from the Council usurping her authority and giving the same order?

She wouldn't have to worry about it much longer because the time was almost up. She fantasized spacing Ryis out the airlock. She hoped for a sudden Cylon attack.

Her musings were brought to a conclusion as they reached zero hour. Ryis was keeping his eye on the clock and no one doubted his accuracy.

"Are you going to perform your duty?" the man asked in a belligerent tone. She thought that giving him a solid sock to the jaw might not be her duty but would definitely count as a pleasure.

But that wouldn't solve her problem any more than an impromptu striptease. Taking a deep breath, she reluctantly gave the order to fire upon the Gamon.

Then came the longest slivers of time in her life. She prayed that each micron would stretch into weeks. She didn't want to bring down death and devastation on Paradis.

With only a heartbeat to go, a message came in that allowed Athena to put the attack on hold. She'd been saved by a morbid miracle.

"The Gamon are dying!" reported a guard serving at New Caprica City.

"What was that?" asked Ryis.

"Dying?" echoed Tigh.

"Did you fire?" asked Sire Opis. "Did I miss something?"

"We haven't fired yet," said Athena.

"Is this some cheap trick to postpone the inevitable?" demanded Ryis.

"The report is from one of your own men!" Athena spat back at him.

"They're dropping dead on the spot," continued the guard excitedly. "I can't believe what I'm seeing."

"I refuse to believe this," said Ryis. "The Gamon are playing a trick on us. We won't fall for it. I order you to fire, Athena, and do it right now!"

"No." It was the easiest decision she'd ever made.

Pushing past her, Ryis ordered the deck officers to fire on his command. When they refused, he shoved one away from her console and attempted to work the controls himself.

Nothing happened because the system required more than one set of hands operating controls at the same moment. The civilian police official present, Captain Page, didn't know what to do but he had the presence of mind to realize that Ryis was out of control.

In the background, the voice of the guard continued to describe the bizarre phenomenon of the collapsing Gamon. Athena wondered what could possibly happen next. But if she thought she was immune to further surprise, she was wrong.

"Stop that man!" came the voice of Commander Apollo. As she watched her brother enter the bridge, she briefly wondered if she were hallucinating, then gave a quick prayer of thanks to the Lords of Kobol.

Apollo had arrived with Boomer and Gar'Tokk, and a prisoner from their recent battle. The three warriors were a commanding presence on the bridge. The civilian police force was in a quandary, weapons part way out of holsters as they looked for guidance from their captain, whose uncertainty was contagious. At this point, he was as likely to order the arrest of Ryis. The Council members who were present began to move slowly back toward the bridge's exitway.

It was time for Apollo to reassert his authority. President Tigh seized the moment, ordering the civilian police to, "Back off! Let Apollo speak!"

"Thank you, Mr. President," replied Apollo with uncharacteristic formality. "I have a report to make to the Council. We have evidence that Ryis has been conspiring to foment an all-out war with the native population. He had his men trail us and attack us in the caves below the planet's surface. They would have killed us, if they could have, and blamed our deaths on the natives—ensuring retaliation from the Colonial Warriors."

The announcement was met with stunned silence.

Tigh cast a murderous glance at Ryis, who had finally realized that he could not fire a battlestar's weapons by himself. He was listening as attentively as everyone else.

Apollo continued. "We discovered a crashed Thirteenth Tribe space ark in a vast cavern below the planet's surface, with vital information concerning this solar system's history and future. We were almost killed by some of Ryis's men, who obviously didn't want us to share this discovery with you. And if you don't believe me, you can ask this man, here, who was

one of the unsuccessful assassins," Apollo concluded, pointing an accusatory finger at the man whom Gar'Tokk held by the scruff of the neck.

Athena finally allowed herself to feel a deep relief that she had not launched the attack on the Gamon that could have permanently estranged her from Apollo and caused untold death and destruction.

Tigh found his voice again. "Ryis, you are to be held under house arrest until we can determine what has transpired."

The fight had gone out of the man. Tigh's statement had the psychological effect of restoring authority on the battlestar's bridge to where it belonged—in the hands of the fleet's elected president and its commander. With a real sense of satisfaction, the civilian police authority started leading the architect away. Handcuffs were not necessary.

The Council members chose that moment to make themselves scarce. Sire Opis exited first, demonstrating a fleetness of foot that no one expected.

"Apollo, can you tell us what is happening on the planet with the Gamon?" Tigh asked.

"Yes, but first hold Ryis here a moment longer."

The police captain stopped, and Ryis turned his face away as Apollo came over and spoke only a few inches away from his enemy.

"Your men tried to kill us in the caves," said Apollo, gesturing again at the man being held by Gar'Tokk. "He confessed everything. If you had succeeded, the Gamon would have been blamed for our murders. You would have gotten away with your plan. The warriors would have joined you to avenge us!"

Ryis was ashen-faced. He started to open his mouth, but closed it without saying a word—as much of a confession as Tigh and the others

needed to know the accusation was true.

Apollo grabbed Ryis by the collar. "The red giant that Paradis orbits is in its final stages of life. Gar"Tokk translated the tablets inside the space ark of the Thirteenth Tribe. They predicted thousands of yahren ago that we would follow in their wake. It's not by accident we came here. This planet's coordinates were given to me in a vision so we would have a place to rest and recuperate, not move in permanently ..and take over! What good would it do you if you had built your new civilization here only to see it destroyed?"

Ryis stared at the man he had tried to murder. "But the reports of the scientists I've been working with down on Paradis suggested that we have more time. Why dismiss those reports?"

"You are such a fool," said Apollo. "The magnetic disturbances on Paradis have fouled up your readings from the beginning. We can't trust any findings taken from the planet's surface. And those we've taken from orbit confirm that the red giant is billions of years old—a prime candidate for moving on to its next stage—a white dwarf. And in the process it will destroy all life in this solar system. It may take another hundred years, or a thousand. But the odds of it beginning tomorrow are just as good. Do you still think it's a good idea to build a new, permanent colony here?"

"I believed we had more time," said Ryis, staring at the floor.

"You would have killed us all," said Apollo and turned his back on the man who would have finished the task begun by the Cylons.

Suddenly, a message came in on Apollo's communicator. It was Koren. "Father! Caran is all right!"

"What do you mean? What happened?"

His adopted son told him of that attempt to destroy the Gamon village and how the girl they had rescued from the quicksand had been caught by the blast even as she tried to help.

"She's in sick bay?" Apollo asked.

"Yes, she survived the explosion."

"More of Ryis's men trying to foment a war," Boomer added.

"I'll be coming to sick bay soon," Apollo told his son. "I have to check in on Starbuck."

"I need to return to the planet and see the elder," said GarTokk. Apollo nodded and the Borellian quickly left the bridge.

"How is Starbuck?" asked Athena.

"In surgery," Apollo told her.

"How serious is it this time?"

"Very serious."

"You have to go to him," she said in a flat voice. "I—I must remain on the bridge. Make sure that Ryis's followers on the planet are informed that there has been a change in plans. Make sure no one else gets killed."

Apollo caught his sister by the shoulders as she turned go back to her station, and saw the strain and shock on her face. Moments later they were embracing, finally able to release their pent-up emotions from the impossible turn of recent events.

As Apollo entered the antiseptic halls of sickbay, he passed by a sleeping Baltar. and made a mental note to check on him before departing. First, he would see Starbuck.

Apollo was desperate to know if he'd gotten his friend back in time. While he waited outside the operating theater, he was joined by Cassie. Her

presence brought back everything Starbuck had said to him on the blood-soaked floor of the cavern that had come close to being their tomb.

They were soon joined by Dalton. The three stood arm in arm, not speaking.

The doctor finally came to tell them the outcome of the surgery. Starbuck was in serious condition, but he had a good chance.

Cassie volunteered to stay by Starbuck's bedside. When he was alone with Dalton, Apollo finally had words of comfort that didn't seem forced or empty. "We must believe he'll pull through. Remember that your father has already died once. He wouldn't have come back unless there was a reason."

They hugged and Dalton allowed herself to cry. She insisted on staying behind to help Cassie on the long watch.

On the way out of the hospital, Apollo remembered to stop by Baltar's room. He had no intention of waking the man from what had appeared his first peaceful slumber in months, but Baltar was already awake.

"I was hoping you'd stop by," said Baltar. "News travels fast here. Seems as if you'll have to bear the burden of being a hero again!"

"Tell me about *you*, Baltar."

"Gladly! That's my favorite subject. The doctor showed me a chart of my brain scans. I owe you for that, Apollo, the way they are sharing information with me."

"I'll check them out myself," Apollo promised, "but give me a thumbnail summary."

"The reason they couldn't find anything physical, like a tumor, was because the problem was not where they looked. There is no obvious damage to my brain!"

"Are you glad of that or does this mean you've finally gone off the deep end?"

"Why don't we bring the doctor in at this point?" Baltar suggested. "She's not a bad sort."

Apollo consented and made a call on his comlink.

The doctor was a stunning brunette named Kim. And she was all business.

"The problem lies with his entire brain," she said.

"Sounds like a bad joke, doesn't it?" Baltar asked.

"I'm not following you," said Apollo.

The doctor explained. "It turns out that Baltar's brain is not exactly his original brain."

Baltar helped her out. "You see, my brain was genetically engineered by the Cylons. It resembles my original brain to the last detail, with all my memories, personality and emotions intact. But there is one important difference. It now acts as a transmitter."

"Oh, no," said Apollo.

"Oh, yes. The Cylons see everything I see. They know where I am and what I'm doing. More important, they know what *you* are doing! That's how they've always known where we are and how to find us!"

Apollo had to sit down. Even for him, it was too much to absorb right away. The doctor picked up the thread of this new nightmare.

"Baltar couldn't have been aware of this," she insisted. "They must have operated on him when he was injured and he never knew the difference."

"At least my nightmares and headaches make some kind of sense now that I know my subconscious has been the playground of so much alien

stuff! I'm basically a camera and communications device for them to keep tabs on your fleet. Distorted data from their world bleeding through into my mind is a sick bonus, if we can figure out how to make use of it!"

"You've got a good point there," Apollo agreed.

"The dreams aren't really dreams at all! I can't tell you what a relief it is to find out that I'm not actually insane!"

"Well, that is still a matter of opinion," said the doctor, proving that she had a sense of humor as well as a pleasant bedside manner.

Apollo let it all sink in. "Have you been able to decipher any of these messages?"

Baltar nodded. "Enough to reach one conclusion. We are in serious trouble if we don't leave Paradis as soon as possible. The Cylons have evolved, and we have no idea into what! The only reason they haven't attacked is because they've been in a civil war between the biological Cylons and the three-brain technological Cylons. It's only a matter of time before they seek us out again; and they may be far superior to what we've faced before!"

"You've given me a lot to think about," said Apollo as he took his leave.

Although Baltar had not been kept in the dark, Apollo insisted on speaking to the doctor alone. He had one question. "Can you operate and repair the problem?"

She had one answer: If we operate, Baltar will die. That is the only way we can terminate transmissions to the Cylons!"

Chapter Twenty-Two

After Apollo left the sick bay, Baltar has another visitor. Cassie stopped by to check on him, as she did with so many of the patients in the bay. He did not look well.

"Can I get you something, Baltar?" she said with concern.

He smiled at that, and the creases of pain in his face relaxed a bit.

"No. Thank you, Cassie. But perhaps I can give you something."

Cassie raised an eyebrow, clearly interested if inherently suspicious of anything that Baltar volunteered. But "Oh?" was all she said.

Baltar did something strange then. He took Cassie's hand in both of his. "Listen, my dear, I have nothing but your best wishes at heart. You have been good to me. Your dear friend Apollo has been good to me as well. And now I wish to return the favor."

Cassie was taken by the man's sincerity.

"I know, Cassie," he said softly, "that there are many complications in your life. I have seen that both Apollo and the devil-may-care Starbuck have cherished places in your heart. And I have seen you with your infant son in arm, buttressed by his love and exuding self-contentment. You seem to me to be happiest in those moments."

Cassie let him continue, wondering where this would lead.

"You may feel that your baby needs a good, strong father, like Apollo or his friend. But let me tell you something: your baby is special. The boy is, perhaps, more than he seems. And perhaps a bit less."

"What do you mean, Baltar?" Cassie asked, dreading what was about to come but knowing the words he was about to speak.

"Cassie... are you certain that Apollo is the father of your child?"

Cassie jerked back, withdrawing her hand from his. But she was not inclined to lie now, either to Baltar or to herself.

"No—I... I'm not," she said with a sigh. "By the Lords, I wish I could say for certain, but I do not really know. Judging by Apollo's reactions, I'd say *he* doesn't think so. Oh, he's loving and supportive, of course. And since I *told* him he was the father, he's too much of a gentleman to disavow the baby. I've never really given him the opportunity to, I guess.

"But why would you bring this up?"

"Because your child is special. I see great things for him ahead."

Baltar lifted his head up and raised his hands toward the ceiling of the compartment. "I get visions, you know," he said almost sheepishly. "I've... seen some things. What may be the future. Or not. It's so hard to be sure. But you, Cassie, are a big part of it. As is your son. You have inner strengths you have yet to tap, and love enough to embrace a nation. But your son will need his mother's time and attention."

"What do you mean?" Cassie said defensively. "I am a good mother. I'm attentive to his every need."

"Except," Baltar said gently, "when Apollo is around. Or Starbuck. At those moments your infant is in the care of Nurse Dennison. And those moments grow more frequent."

Cassie thought about that, and admitted the truth to herself. Baltar was only stating what he had seen with his own eyes.

"What is it that your visions tell you about me... and my baby?" she asked.

Baltar thought for a few seconds. Then he said, "All I can say for certain is that he needs you now. He needs your undivided attention. And, for whatever reason, he has not been receiving it."

Cassie lowered her eyes and nodded. "I—it's because of what you said before. Maybe Apollo is not the baby's father. Maybe the baby's father is some alien monster! Maybe my son is... not human," she whispered this, finally giving voice to fears that had been consuming her for many months now.

Baltar took her hand in his once more, and she did not draw away.

"Cassie, such fears are natural. I believe your son is human. Or, perhaps, more than human. But he is not an alien monster. Do not turn your back on him. Do not allow your emotions for Apollo and Starbuck to overcome your instincts. This is a crucial moment for all the fleet. Let the warriors tend to their tasks. You must have your own agenda."

At that moment Cassie allowed herself to collapse into Baltar's arms, sobbing softly. Try as hard as she could to reject his words, she could not.

At last the tears ebbed, and she spoke. "I don't know why I should listen to you, let alone trust you. But the truth of your words resounds in my heart. I... I have been afraid of my own son." Wiping the remnants of tears from her cheeks, she sat up and graced Baltar with a full smile.

"Whatever your motives, Baltar, I thank you for your words. I've always prided myself on being a realist and a pragmatist, and I've recently strayed far from that path. I do need to reorder my priorities. Thank you."

And then she bent over and did something that took both of them by surprise. She kissed him softly on his cheek.

When Tigh, Apollo and Gar'Tokk attended their last meeting of the Gamon council, they were concerned about their newfound friends being left behind on a planet that could become a death trap very soon. Of course, the humans had been greatly relieved to hear the elder's explanation regarding the mass death of the Gamon protestors.

Death was not the same on every world.

The elder gave them a final message.

Do not be concerned for us. We will survive the same as our brothers and sisters who passed before us. You thought they died when they chose to make the great journey. As they did a short span ago, we will also pass from this world and evolve to a higher frequency of light, proceeding to new life in a higher dimension. The Paradis that you know will move back into light as we ascend to a Paradis that is even more beautiful than this one. Remember what you have learned here. You were foolishly on the way to a lower plane but now there is hope for you again.

The thoughts and power of the elder stayed with Apollo that night as he spent a lone vigil by the bedside of Starbuck. He didn't know if he brought the inner peace of the elder with him into that room but prayed that he did. He only knew that the plane he inhabited with his friends was precious to him and he wanted his comrade to return.

Starbuck was on both their minds, when Cassie accepted Apollo's invitation to revisit one of the planet's most beautiful spots. They met in a shaded glade on Paradis that would soon be lost to them once they returned to space.

"It's good for us to be here together," she said, "away from the hospital."

"Yes."

"I've been tending Starbuck for days. Do you believe he will come out of his coma?"

"I hope and pray he does. We both need him back with us."

They watched a small fountain bubbling, an ever-replenishing spring of fresh water. Apollo wished it might be the elixir of life so that he could take a cup to his old friend.

"They keep me informed about his condition, and I know you're there for him," he told Cassie.

"Yes."

"You still love him."

She caught his eye and spoke to his heart. "I will always love him, it's true. But I have love enough for another. I love you, too, Apollo."

She turned back to see his reaction but he kept his face impassive.

"You are a very special man and I've grown to care about you deeply. But I learned to take care of myself a long time ago. I never thought it would be possible, but the passage of time and the understanding of friends has taught me that I can stand on my own two feet, because I'm really *not* alone. I can be the woman I've always wanted to be."

In Apollo's eyes, Cassie had never looked more beautiful, more radiant, than at this moment. He felt the love of her bubble over inside and allowed himself to do what came next without thought or pause.

He got down on one knee, and Cassie's eyes went as wide as saucers.

"I may have forgotten how to do this properly, so please forgive me if I make a fool of myself," he said.

Her lips trembled, but she said nothing.

"It's been a while, but here goes. If you're willing to accept an extremely flawed man who has a long way to go in learning how to love a woman, will you be sealed to me, Cassie?"

"Oh, Apollo! You've just made me incredibly happy. But I feel no need to be closer to you than I am right now. In fact, I don't know how I could be any closer. I love you for asking."

Apollo was confused. "Is that a yes?" he said.

Cassie smiled. "No. I need you to be my friend, and sometime lover. But most of all right now I need you—we need you—to be Apollo, commander of the fleet. The man who will safely lead us from this fool's paradise to our greater destiny."

As he started to protest, she placed her forefinger on his lips.

"And our son needs a full-time mother. I can deal with that, if you can," she finished with a soft smile.

Apollo was flooded with conflicting emotions. Simultaneously he loved her more now than he ever had before, while feeling more relieved than he could ever have expected.

"So we keep the status quo?" he asked.

She nodded.

"And leave the question of sealing for the future?" •

"As you wish," she said. "But that's for the future. Right now, it would be a shame to waste this gorgeous setting, don't you think?"

Before he could respond, she embraced him and kissed him deeply.

It was a time of meetings and greetings, of farewells and memories. Quite by accident, Sheba and Rhaya met at Cain's grave. Afterward they

would wonder if his spirit had helped bring about the encounter. Maybe there were no coincidences.

"I was wondering where you went off to," said Sheba, unable to forget Rhaya's birthmark.

"Did you know him well?" Sheba asked, nodding toward the grave.

"No, but I admired him," Rhaya answered. "I was raised without a father so I considered him a substitute."

"You never knew your father?"

"No, my mother told me he died before I was born."

Sheba put her hand on Rhaya's shoulder. "We have a lot to talk about concerning Commander Cain."

Rhaya sighed. "I hardly knew him but I feel that he was such a large part of my life."

"He was important to both of us. Let's drink ambrosia to honor the past."

"And let's drink to a great future," added the younger girl, whose intoxication was optimism.

The two women walked away from Cain's grave for the last time.

Cassie continued to work in the hospital. She was a few feet away from his bed the day that Starbuck regained consciousness. She moved to his side and quietly took his hand in hers.

He smiled up at her, and a few moments later, he spoke. "I thought I died and went to heaven when your face was the first sight I saw."

She fell on him with hugs and kisses. "You almost did, Starbuck. You had us all worried sick!"

"Hey, I thought I was the one who was sick."

She brought him water, still disbelieving her eyes. She tried to keep him talking. He hadn't suffered any brain damage as far as she could tell. It was another miracle on Paradis.

"I had a dream," he told her. "You and I were sealed and we had three children. Can you believe it? The funny part is that I felt happier than I'd ever been in my life."

Momentarily startled, Cassie recovered herself and remembered recent events. "Well, dreams are nice, but sooner or later we all have to face reality."

He didn't like the sound of that. "Cassie, I don't want to lose you. I know that I've let you down many times in the past. I've broken your heart and caused you so much pain."

"We don't need to talk about that now. I'm glad you're back with us. That's all that matters."

He couldn't shake the feeling that her nursing of him had revived him only for him to discover that his secret fear was coming true. It was Cassie, not Athena, whom he truly wanted.

"I love you," he said.

She smiled at him. "I know."

"I need to ask you something now, Cassie. Something that I should have asked you long ago."

Cassie looked a bit startled at that. She began to shrug him off, but he persisted.

"Cassie, focus on what I'm saying, because I won't believe my own ears: Will you be sealed to me?"

He expected her to draw back from him then. He expected her to say she didn't love him enough to spend the rest of her life with him. He even expected her to say that it was Apollo she really loved, not him. What he did not expect her to do was to laugh.

She kissed him softly on the lips, and said, "No, Starbuck. I have been doing a lot of thinking lately. I'm kind of comfortable again with who I am. And I'm having a great time with my baby. And I like working with the doctors and nurses in sick bay. My life is full. And you are a major part of it—and always will be. And as long as we can keep things like that, I am happy."

All Starbuck could say was, "Did you say 'No'?"

Cassie laughed again, and nodded her head. "Yes, Starbuck. I said no. But if it makes you feel better, that's the same answer I gave Apollo when he asked me."

"Apollo? What—?"

"And now that you've regained consciousness, there are about two trillion people I have to tell." And with that, she rose and left a stunned and confused Starbuck.

"Did she say no?" he asked aloud, but there was no one there to respond.

During the course of the next few weeks, the Colonials made haste in their preparations to leave Paradis and its uncertain star. An amazing amount of ingenuity was displayed in reconstructing every vessel for which such a tactic was plausible. The revelation of the discovery of the ancient space ark, with its message from the Thirteenth Tribe, had been circulated throughout the fleet.

That fact that Gar'Tokk was the one who had translated the message—was, in fact the only one who could have—had made him into a bit of a celebrity among the Colonials. Unfortunately, Borellian Nomen are not comfortable with celebrity, and Gar'Tokk took to staying more and more in his quarters. But in due course he had to leave to confer with Apollo.

Having read through the tablets in the space ark, Gar'Tokk had a strong feeling that part of the message was information about where the colonial fleet should head next. This he imparted to Apollo as the commander was in the midst of dealing with too many civilians for too few ships. All of the military ships left in the fleet had been outfitted with additional quarters. They also converted as many cargo containers as they could spare into living spaces, filling the rest of them with food, supplies, and as much tylium as they could carry.

The logistics of creating enough room so as not to have to leave anyone behind consumed Apollo and Tigh, Athena and Starbuck. Boomer, Trays, Dalton and Troy flew dozens of missions a day, ferrying goods and materiel from the planet to orbit, then from orbit to the fleet's foundry ship and other destinations. The Council of Twelve had reaffirmed that Tigh had their full authority and backing, while at the same time issuing a proclamation of imminent emergency, which squarely placed acting authority back on Apollo shoulders. There was no more dissention. Everyone was focused on the task at hand.

And then the day came when Dr. Salik informed them that the giant red sun was getting ready to contract. Severe ion storms that played havoc with their communications confirmed the fact. But the timing was propitious: the *Galactica*, the *Daedalus* and the rest of the cobbled-back-together fleet were ready to go.

Apollo stood on the bridge of the *Galactica*, Boomer at his side. He spoke with Athena at her station aboard the *Daedalus*. All was in readiness. They would have to use conventional drive to move some distance from Paradis and the red star system before they could engage their faster-than-light engines. As they pulled out of orbit, a crowd gathered on the bridge to watch the departure.

Apollo gave the order to leave, unable to take his eyes from the visual display as the planet, so seemingly perfect, slowly grew distant on the giant screen. Apollo realized that someone had a hand on his right shoulder, and someone else his left: Cassie and Starbuck. They exchanged glances, but said nothing.

Finally, Cassie spoke up. "This was an important stop along the path we are traveling."

They gave her curious looks. "We learned that we are still under the guidance of the Lords of Kobol. We arrived here through Apollo's vision, and our discoveries here validated that vision. We learned once more that we must trust Apollo's guidance for the fleet. Those of us that ever doubted it, I mean," she added with a smile.

"And it gave Apollo a rare chance to play the hero and save *my* life for a change," added Starbuck.

"Well, we all make mistakes," said Apollo with a straight face. "Live and learn."

"Yeah," said Starbuck. "I learned that the moment my back is turned my best friend will try to marry the girl I love."

They all smiled at that.

"And I learned that the love and trust of a true friend is worth more than anything in the universe," Apollo said.

"Stop, Apollo!" Starbuck said. "You make me feel like cracking open a bottle of chilled ambrosia and having a good cry."

"Hey!" said Boomer, "I'm right there with you! Except for the crying part, of course."

There was one member of the *Galactica* who did not go to the bridge to see their departure from Paradis. Baltar was in his quarters, in his bed, covered with cold sweat. He had been having nightmares again. He had sought his bed for rest only because he had disdained sleep for way too many centons. Even the pain in his head could not prevent him from falling off. Now, having shaken himself awake, he lay there panting, thinking to himself *It's only a dream*. But he knew better. The nightmare images had coalesced into one great menacing message: Put out the welcome mat, Baltar, the Cylons are coming.